

THE ARGOSY.

MAY, 1883.

WINIFRED POWER.

CHAPTER XIII.

ALL HER WORLD AGAINST HER.

WINIFRED had left The Limes declaring she would never enter it again, and the reader does not need to be told that Mrs. Chandos-Fane returned home in a mood of long-suffering dignity admirable to contemplate. She lighted her candle with her own hand, shot one wary glance at her daughter out of the extreme corner of her eyes, then gathered her skirts tightly round her ankles, as if she were going to step over a gutter, and vanished upstairs.

This was the first instalment of the general snubbing which began for Winifred from that evening.

The next day a packet was brought her, at sight of which the blood rushed to her cheeks, for she recognised Mark's handwriting in the address. But there was no word inside from him: only extracts from the newspapers, containing the account of Martha's trial. She read them, but the effect produced upon her was far other than that intended. Mark's conviction had doubtless been that a perusal of "the facts" would convert her. Winifred on the contrary read between the lines, and in every protestation of Martha's innocence by the counsel, every allusion to the "prisoner's" demeanour, every remark about John and his sister, she saw a fresh confirmation of her own belief.

She returned the packet as it had been sent to her—without a line; thinking to herself as she did so, that probably no further communication would ever pass between herself and Mark. Her heart died within her; but she would not own that she suffered.

Nevertheless she turned white and red by turns and found not so much as a syllable of greeting a few hours later when Mark walked into her studio.

He looked disturbed, and even a little sullen, like one impelled to come against his will. Indeed, he had not taken the step without a

struggle. He was masterful by nature, and held that submission was a woman's duty. His feeling for Winifred had rather surprised him: he had fallen in love with her in his own despite. But he was not very deeply in yet—or at least he thought so—and his pride was committed now to the preliminary task of conquering her. He made sure it would not be difficult. Very gravely, but gently, he spoke.

"You read the papers? Then," as she bent her head in affirmation, "why did you make no remark upon them?"

"I had no remark to make," she replied quietly.

"Am I to conclude that you feel the injustice of your accusations against my father?"

Winifred tried to free her hand—failed—then burst out imploringly: "Let us not speak on the subject—you blame me, of course—how should you do otherwise? To you I simply seem prejudiced, ungrateful——"

"Of gratitude I do not speak. But as to your being prejudiced, I should like to know who could deny it," interrupted Mark, with his grave smile. There was a dangerously tender light in his eyes, and he made a movement as if to draw her closer to him. In the faltering tones of her voice, the quick, dismayed turns of her head, in her evident distress and sorrow, she seemed to him very sweet and womanly. Another moment and she would yield. He would hold her in his arms and tell her that he loved her. But Winifred, although he would not have believed it, was still a long way off that complacent consummation. With a sudden effort, she wrenched herself free and cried out: "My determination is irrevocable. I regret my speech to your father, but I do not withdraw it."

Mark's brow darkened. Repulsed tenderness, wounded pride, and outraged affection began to raise a storm within him. Nevertheless he asked her quietly on what she based her convictions, listened in attentive silence to the story of her acquaintance with Miss Freake, of Clara Smythe's taunt, of Martha's ravings, and Ridgeley's dying statement. Very patiently and dispassionately he tried to make her see how little all these uncertain proofs amounted to: how certain it was that Miss Freake would protest her own innocence: how little meaning could be attached to her ravings: how likely it was that Ridgeley's pretended confession had had no other root than revenge for what he conceived to be a denial of his demands.

"You cannot be surprised if I am indignant at your accusations," continued Mark. "I should be more indignant, only——" he paused, then added in an altered tone—"only that you are the accuser. But I do not despair of converting you. I hope that you will return with me to The Limes, and there hear from my father himself that your words have been buried in oblivion."

"No," said Winifred, and raised her head with an ominous flash of her eyes. She could not judge at this moment, but at least she could resist—and she would resist to the last. Mark rose.

"Consider what you lose by this refusal, Miss Power. The love of your friends and of your adopted father, the support of those who might be useful to you in your career, the esteem of everybody who, until to-day, had given you credit for intelligence and good feeling."

Winifred had winced at the allusion to Mr. Russell, for there Mark touched a chord of deep prophetic pain. But she answered steadily enough: "You confuse two problems. My duties towards my adopted parents are one thing; my relations towards Sir John Hatherley are another. All that I have at present to do is to break off every connection with—your father."

She spoke the last words in a lower voice, and wrung her hands together as she ended.

Mark stood silent, cruelly wounded. He took his hat and turned towards the door, finding nothing to reply that would not have betrayed the deep resentment which his pride urged him to conceal. But as he glanced back at Winifred and saw her standing there with the sunlight touching her golden head; as her eyes met his mournfully, and he noted that she trembled; then his love and her beauty spoke too strongly for anger, and he went eagerly to her side.

"Winifred—consider! Have you no fear of regret?"

It was the first time he had called her by her name, and the sound of it was sweeter than she had ever thought that human words could be. Regret? Yes, she knew that she would regret; her heart even now was full of pain. But what of that? A little happiness more or less in youth seems a small matter when the dazzling vistas of the world are scarce unfolded, and life offers treasures in specious abundance.

Winifred shut her heart to its own pleadings; she closed her ears to the meaning of Mark's tone, and turned away from the reluctant passion of his eyes as she whispered: "My resolution is irrevocable."

"Listen!" said the young man, and again took her hand. "I never thought to have patience in such a cause; but I feel that I cannot leave you thus. You are angry now, excited, strung up to a determination, and too proud to renounce it. I ask only one thing of you—not to speak your last word yet. Take a little while to consider before you break with us entirely—my dear."

There was a silence which, from all the emotion compressed into it, seemed very long to both of them. Mark clasped her hand closer, then, as she visibly shrank, released it and stood back very pale but mute. Winifred, feeling herself drifting, covered her face, and sank upon a chair. She must accord no delay, accept no compromise, or she was lost. That was her thought, but the words in which to say it would not come.

"I cannot change my mind. I—I am sorry to refuse it to you. But—after all—what does it matter if we part?" said she at last.

"It matters very much to me," answered Mark bitterly and proudly. "But of course if your decision be final, I must cease to combat it. Is it final?"

"Yes," breathed Winifred softly. She listened quite curiously to her own voice as she said it, and was listening still after Mark had traversed the room with a rapid step and closed the door behind him.

On realising that she was again alone, she rose with a commonplace air, and quite quietly and quickly set about cleaning her palette. She was satisfied with herself. She had done what she always intended to do whenever a crisis in her life presented itself: she had been true to her own principles. Supposing she had yielded and gone back to The Limes, forgetting Miss Freake and her wrongs, and taking the hand of Sir John in friendship, by this time she would already have begun to feel remorseful and ashamed. The pain she felt would be fleeting; in fact she thought it had already fled; but the joy of an approving conscience would endure. She nodded her head and smiled at her approving conscience, and then, all at once burst into tears!

Lost in a very passion of sobs, blind and deaf to everything around her, she was presently discovered by Mrs. Chandos-Fane, who began pouring forth a characteristic flood of consolation.

"I am surprised at your agitation, love, although I can understand that you begin to see the folly of your conduct. If you had consulted your poor mother before speaking last night, perhaps things might have been different. But I am accustomed to be considered a fool. Fortunately Mr. Burton—I hear Mr. Mark Hatherley has been here. I suppose he was very angry?"

Winifred made no reply, only checked her sobs and dried her tears, mortified at having been discovered in such a state. But her mother's curiosity was not to be repressed.

"He is not what I call an agreeable young man, although I believe you think him intelligent, darling. For myself, I prefer good-breeding to intellect. I suppose he was very rude to you? Had I been present that might not have happened: but you gave me no hint of his coming. I suppose you preferred—well, no matter! But I never should have expected him to make you cry."

"He did not make me cry," retorted Winifred, too intensely irritated to consider whether her answer were strictly true.

"No?" said Mrs. Fane interrogatively. "Then, what is it? Nothing? Why, then, you must be hysterical, darling. I do not understand that sort of thing myself, but I never was morbid—never. You remember we are engaged to dine to-morrow at The Limes: shall you go?"

"Not I certainly," answered Winifred, somewhat unheroically. "I am not going to The Limes again."

Mrs. Fane looked as much surprised as if her daughter were affirming that Mr. Burton had turned dancing dervish. Her first anger of yesterday evaporated, she was quite incapable of regarding Winifred's conduct from a serious point of view. The notion of any real breach with Sir John—the potentate of the neighbourhood—

astounded her. She tried a little argument, not much ; then passed to persuasion ; and, this failing, relapsed into her usual self-laudatory strain of lamentation. Baffled in every attempt to shake Winifred's determination, she informed her that she was "a mule," and went up stairs to write a letter on her own account to Sir John. The letter was a masterpiece. It began by stating that her "sweet child had a feverish headache;" went on to say that "in all probability her keen maternal anxiety would not allow her to dine from home on the morrow ; but perhaps dear Sir John would allow her to leave the question open."

This brought a very stately and forgiving epistle from the outraged master of The Limes. Sir John declared that he felt it incumbent upon his own dignity to leave Miss Power's conversion to her better sense and feeling ; consequently he should never allude again to the extraordinary scene of the previous evening. At the same time, it must be understood that the first step towards burying it in oblivion could not come from himself. For the rest, with Mrs. Chandos-Fane he had no quarrel, and hoped never to have one. And he trusted that Miss Power would be sufficiently recovered to allow her mother to join the dinner-party at The Limes next day.

This magnanimous composition was brought, wonderful to relate, by Mrs. Hatherley herself. Her eyes still had that light of suppressed excitement and awakened curiosity which had come into them the night before. She did not say much, but sat and looked at Winifred with a speechless inquisitiveness, almost like a monkey's, until the girl began to find her presence positively uncanny. All at once, in the midst of Mrs. Fane's protestations of profound emotion at Sir John's generosity, the little creole suddenly asked : "Did Miss Power know many people who had been acquainted with Sir John in his young days?"

The malignant curiosity manifest in this question so scandalised Mrs. Fane that she hastily interposed, saying that her darling daughter had led a most secluded life, and had, she regretted to say, a very limited and insufficient knowledge of the world.

"Well, that must be your fault," placidly remarked Mrs. Hatherley.

"My fault?" Mrs. Fane gasped. Mrs. Hatherley was sometimes so very impertinent!

"You let her be brought up by strangers."

"Strangers?" An insulted *hidalgo* might have envied the tone in which Mrs. Fane repeated the word. "I am not aware that my dear, my only brother, a hopeless invalid, can be considered a stranger. He has been unfortunate, that is true ; disappointed of a baronetcy and deprived by circumstances of his fortune : and he and his wife are childless. When he asked for my child to fill the void of their existence, was I to deny her to him? Was I——"

"Dear me! I don't know what you were to do, I am sure," interrupted Mrs. Hatherley in a tone of peevish indifference, and with

her watchful marmoset-like eyes still fixed on Winifred. But the flood-gates of Mrs. Fane's eloquence once opened were not so easily closed again, and the West Indian had to listen to a torrent of words, which were possibly intended as much to baffle her curiosity as to relieve the speaker's feelings. Fairly beaten at last, she rose in a ruffled condition and trundled herself and her wraps away, with all her unanswered questions in her.

Days lengthened into weeks. And while Winifred busied herself with the preparations for her mother's wedding, the breach between herself and Sir John remained unhealed. Mark was almost constantly in London, and she hardly ever saw him, even in the street. Dolly's partisanship, chiefly expressed as it was by the nods and becks and wreathed smiles of a secret understanding, although droll, was not in the highest degree consolatory to Winifred. The neighbourhood aware, although without knowing why, that she was in Sir John's black books, looked a little askance at her: and she had, to bear, in a general atmosphere of disapproval, the dreary monotony of days that succeed upon excitement.

CHAPTER XIV.

GERTRUDE PAYS A VISIT.

WHILE Winifred Power was reaping the meagre harvest of her heroism, Gertrude's course at The Limes grew daily more triumphant.

Little by little the sceptre of government passed from the feeble hands of Mrs. Hatherley into hers. Little by little she usurped altogether the sisters' prerogatives of waiting upon Sir John.

It must be confessed that, whether from the soothing influence of her presence, or whether, as more likely, from her dexterous avoidance of unnecessary trouble, Sir John was incomparably less exacting than of yore. He did not want so many things; he was not so often attacked by sickness; when attacked, his majestic irritation was less apparent. He kept Gertrude a good deal with him; made her write out the menus of his sumptuous dinners; and dictated to her his courtly notes.

She was initiated into nearly all the secrets of his occupations, and found them considerably less imposing than the "outside world" supposed. Sir John, in the midst of his tomes and his papers, passed a good deal of his time in sleep. "His distressing malady precluded him now from profound study. He lived with the treasures that he had amassed in the past." Gertrude listened very respectfully to this, and swept out afterwards upon the world with all the insolent consciousness of a knowledge that gave her the upper hand.

If she did not teach Dolly and Florence much (and, indeed, Sir John's demands made that almost impossible), she persecuted them a good deal in numberless microscopic ways. She made them fetch and carry for her, with a deliberate, disdainful obtuseness to their signs of revolt. She crushed them with her beauty, her elegance and her cleverness a hundred times a day.

By the servants she was, of course, detested as an upstart; but she governed them with a steel hand in a velvet glove, and they dared not protest. With Mark she got on admirably. In spite of her loveliness, she stirred no fibre of passion in him, and she was wise and keen enough to find that out from the first. Abandoning all thought of subjugating him, she met him on the grounds of a frankness and a shrewdness which enchanted him. He considered her a "managing woman," but the least obnoxious specimen of the race that he had ever met. It was this power of being all things to all men that ensured Gertrude's success. She was a syren in the library, and a housekeeper out of it.

Mark's blindness drove his aunt and her daughters to despair.

"She is a *viper*!" exclaimed Mrs. Hatherley, with unwonted energy, one afternoon when she was very much awake.

"A cross, disagreeable thing," said Dorothy.

"And thinks nobody can do aught but herself," added Florence.

Mark, installed in an arm-chair, with a book in his hand, looked up from his reading with lifted eyebrows. The finer shades of misconduct easily discoverable by the female mind, naturally escaped his masculine perception: and he was genuinely amazed at the outburst which had greeted his ears.

"I believe her to be a mere adventuress," resumed Mrs. Hatherley, encouraged by Mark's signs of attention.

"She is half her time in bed—or in her room."

"And tells such *shocking* stories."

"Pray go on," said their hearer, surveying them with an exasperating smile of incredulity. "I am lost in admiration of your descriptive powers. Unaided, I should never have awakened to the harm in Miss Dallas. She is handsome and clever; always in a good humour; hard-working——"

"*What?*" shrieked the trio in concert. "A horrid, ill-tempered, designing, grasping——"

"I say, that's enough," interrupted Mark, rather roughly. "If there is one thing I do thoroughly detest it is the abusive chatter of women. Especially where it is not deserved."

Upon which Mrs. Hatherley sank back with a martyred moan; Flossie began to whimper; Dolly tossed her head in triumph at her secret resolutions.

After five minutes or so of indignant silence had reigned, the door opened and Gertrude herself entered, with an air of most provoking loveliness.

"I am going up to London," said the apple of discord, sweetly. "Can I do anything for anybody?"

This obliging question was met for the most part with frozen contempt. Only Mark spoke:

"You are very kind. But shall I not accompany you?"

"To Marshall and Snelgrove's? I would not impose such a sacrifice for the world."

"It would be a pleasure."

"Mark! And if I stop even to *look* at a shop-window you are as cross as you can be," exclaimed Florence, resentfully.

"That is a different thing," was the reply, delivered with supreme candour.

"No, indeed, it is not different," interposed Gertrude. "You are very, *very* kind, Mr. Hatherley, but I really must insist upon going by myself." And with a parting glance of gratitude, she went, saying under her breath, as she closed the door: "How furious they were! And how little he knows what a nuisance he would have been!"

Messrs. Marshall and Snelgrove had apparently changed their place of business; for Miss Dallas no sooner reached London than she took a cab and had herself driven to the north end of the town.

On reaching a very shabby street in a very dingy suburb she showed some surprise.

"Are you sure that this is Araminta Grove?" she inquired, first of the cabman, and then of a passer-by. Assured by both that there was no mistake, she shrugged her shoulders, paid her fare, and knocked at No. 12. There was no answer for some minutes, but a second and more impatient summons brought an untidy looking maiden to the door.

"Is Colonel Quince at home?"

"No; but he'd very likely not be long," was the impression of the maiden, stated with as much expedition as her extreme astonishment at Gertrude's appearance would allow.

"Then I will wait," said Miss Dallas: and she was shown into a sordid little sitting-room, which did not help to restore her good-humour. And when, at the end of half-an-hour, the door opened and a gentleman swaggered in, her only greeting was: "At last! I suppose you forgot that I was coming."

"By no means, my child," replied Colonel Quince, calmly. He removed his hat, pulled down his shirt-cuffs with an air of dandy elegance, and seated himself opposite his fair, incensed visitor.

"Any news?" he inquired.

"None," said Gertrude, curtly. "I believe you sent me on a wild-goose chase."

"What, no papers? No skeleton in the closet?"

"Nothing, I tell you."

Colonel Quince looked grave.

"Old fellow coming on at all?" he presently resumed.

"I don't know what you mean," replied Gertrude, grandly, but she coloured. Apparently she detected an exasperating flicker of incredulity in his eyes, for she continued with obvious irritation: "If you would drop your mysteries for once, and talk in something clearer than riddles, we might reach a definite result. But I believe you have been fooling me, from first to last."

"Not I," said the Colonel.

She made an impatient movement. "Why cannot you speak out?"

"Caution forbids it, madam. I know your sex. Sieves."

"A profound observation!" remarked Gertrude, with ironical gravity. "But since you will tell me nothing else, perhaps you will explain the change in your circumstances."

"My circumstances?" Colonel Quince quite chuckled. "That's a good one. Do you allude to the change in my abode?"

"Of course I do. The last time I saw you, you were in expensive lodgings at the West End."

"And now I have altered my latitude. A mere vicissitude of fortune, my dear. It is plain you have not known me long."

"No, but I have heard of you long enough," replied Gertrude, with slow scorn, as she regarded him. He was very well dressed, but indescribably dissipated in appearance, and had that air of "seedy" shrewdness which belongs to unsuccessful adventurers. For the rest, he was rather a handsome man still, and looked as if he might once have been a gentleman. He took her scrutiny with perfect composure, for there was an odd kind of familiarity between them that yet had no trace of affection. Nevertheless when, after some more conversation, Gertrude put out her little gloved hand in farewell, he held it in his own with a certain sort of friendliness and patronage.

"I should not like you, for your own credit, to make a failure of things down there. Have you laid siege to the son?"

"To Mark? No. Nor ever shall." She shook her head decidedly as she spoke, for some loyalty she still had, and she more than suspected Winifred Power's feelings. But this was not a reason to be confessed to her present companion. Bassesse oblige as well as noblesse, and Colonel Quince, as she knew by experience, was wont to stigmatise scruples as melodramatic.

"Won't rise to the bait, I suppose," he remarked, with a malicious smile. "Well, good-bye, my child; I must not complain of your keeping your secrets, if I keep mine, I suppose. Only remember this: if you are able to find out anything of that matter, you must inform me at once: I am your confederate."

Gertrude winced. The suggestion of such a partnership was not pleasant; although to her love of excitement and perverted romanticism, an intrigue in which even Colonel Quince played a part was better than no intrigue at all. She absolutely hugged the thought that while Mrs. Hatherley and her daughters were sipping their afternoon tea in the luxurious drawing-room at The Limes; while Winifred

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was making the most of the fading daylight for her picture ; and Mrs. Chandos-Fane was absorbed in the cut of a skirt, or the trimming of a bonnet ; she, contemptuous of dull respectability and commonplace effort, was paying a clandestine visit to a disreputable individual in his shabby lodgings in Kentish Town.

"I suppose you have not a spare half-sovereign ?" inquired Colonel Quince at parting.

"How should I have ? You know I receive no salary and the only money I ever get is from poor Dick—that is, at present," Gertrude hastened to add. "But I have not forgotten that my first respectable appearance at The Limes was entirely owing to you."

"And is Dick hard-up ?"

"Perhaps not quite so much so as usual just now. But I don't know where he gets his money."

"There are ways." And Colonel Quince waved his hand vaguely towards limitless horizons.

"Whatever Dick's ways may be, I am quite sure they are honest," answered Dick's sister, flushing up hotly as if in answer to an unspoken accusation. Then, half ashamed at this one little touch of nature in herself ; angry, too, at the dawning mockery in her companion's face, she turned away abruptly and with a curt "good-bye," ran down the narrow stair.

As Gertrude hurried through the fog and drizzle of the winter day, and met the sons and daughters of toil—poor workmen, jaded milliners, pallid daily teachers—plodding wearily homewards under the lately-lighted lamps, a great contempt for them rose within her. How much cleverer was she ! how much more intrepid ! how much surer of success ! The precise nature of the destiny which she was to carve out for herself she could not have told if asked ; only she was determined that it should be as unlike as possible to the sordid greyness of ordinary existence.

An intense belief in herself made her personality a potent one. With those whom she chose to conciliate, she interested by a sphinx-like air of keeping back the true secrets of her nature : and a certain intellectual power enabled her to rise superior to the smaller arts and paltrier motives of the ordinary adventurers. She had a wayward kind of generosity ; a fitful sort of incomplete nobility ; and all the lavishness of a character which thoroughly despises work. In the best of her dreaming she had ideas that were not wholly selfish. She meant to do a great deal for her family—when she should have succeeded in achieving a position for herself. That would be the moment of her greatest triumph ; and her own people who had been so ready, as she thought, to despise her would then render her a tardy, but not less welcome, justice. On dispassionate consideration she concluded that misconduct was inferior policy ; consequently she decided to be virtuous, and to use virtue as one of the weapons in her armoury.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MISSING PSALTER.

THE time for Mrs. Fane's wedding had now drawn near, and Mr. Burton had settled with an old college friend to come down to perform the ceremony.

"He is a very good fellow, is Archer," he said one day to Sir John. "And, by-the-bye, he is a great bibliophile. He will be enchanted with your collection; especially, I think, with the Psalter—the gold on a purple ground—that cost you such a sum. I doubt if even he has anything like it."

Mrs. Fane's pleasure in the arrangements for her wedding was poisoned by the thought that the people of The Limes would not be among the guests. She had, indeed, at one time nourished the dream of a wedding-breakfast at the great house; and had gently hinted as much to Sir John. But he, for all his amiability, had not only turned a deaf ear, but had declined, for himself, and his family, the invitation to the ceremony which the bride and bridegroom elect had not failed to despatch him.

"It is all your fault, darling; but I do not reproach you; I say nothing," said Mrs. Chandos-Fane to her pale and silent daughter. "I am aware that the neighbourhood will think it very strange—very. No doubt it will even be said that I have given Sir John grounds of just complaint against me."

"You can assure your acquaintances that it is all my fault," replied Winifred.

Mrs. Fane looked extremely offended.

"I am not treacherous, love. Neither treacherous nor selfish. I think I may say that nobody has ever accused me of such defects. Although I have not always been done full justice to, perhaps, in my own family (I may be mistaken, but I fancy sometimes this is the case), I can without excessive vanity lay claim to having had more friends than enemies. Nobody has ever found me unamiable or mean. And I should not think of justifying myself in the eyes of the neighbourhood at the expense of my child."

"I am sure I had far rather you would tell everybody the truth, than say so much on the subject to me," answered Winifred, more wearily than wisely.

Upon which Mrs. Fane, after a little pause of mournful astonishment, informed her that her temper was growing every day more unbearable; that the hour might come when she would be sorry for having treated her poor mother in such a way; but that for the rest, Mrs. Fane's patience was equal to most trials. She was thankful, after having suffered so much, to think that whatever Mr. Burton's faults might be—and she did not consider him perfect—his sympathy, at any rate, would never fail her.

How pretty and how marvellously young Mrs. Chandos-Fane looked on her wedding-day ! It was the universal remark. In her elegant costume, with her petite figure, her golden fringe, her dainty manner, and winning smiles, she made a striking contrast to her tall and stately and grave-looking daughter.

The wedding was a brilliant affair in spite of the absence of the Hatherleys, and Mr. Burton seemed becomingly conscious that he was quite a subject for congratulation and envy.

Mrs. Burton and her daughter parted with tears. "I shall miss you," said poor Winifred, with genuine feeling.

"I am sure you will," replied her mother, with no less sincere belief. "Had my feelings ever been consulted at any time by anybody, we should not have separated. But it is useless to go back upon the unfortunate past. (Take care of my bonnet, love.) Our honeymoon will not last long, for my husband's sacred duties—duties in which I shall, I hope, fully share—will soon recall him.—I declare there's a button off my glove !"

This painful discovery abruptly arrested the flow of the bride's eloquence, and Winifred said gently, "Once I am in Paris, I shall probably not leave again for some time."

Mrs. Burton replied that she was aware of that. She knew that her dear daughter always preferred to be away from her. Nevertheless, she might one day discover that a mother's arms were a welcome refuge, and when that day dawned, Mrs. Burton would be happy to receive her. With this final assurance, a kiss, and an admonition not to tread upon her train, the little lady took her husband's arm, nodded graciously to everybody, stepped into her carriage, and, amid a shower of rice and of slippers, was triumphantly driven away.

Winifred, left all alone, had received several invitations to stay, at least for one night, with people in the neighbourhood. But she had declined them—thus earning for herself some reputation for eccentricity. The truth was, that her chief desire now was to escape from Elmsleigh and its associations. Once free of them, she hoped she should be able to cast off the regret that, day and night, since her interview with Mark had tugged at her heart-strings.

She had not found it easy, as she had anticipated, to do without positive happiness. Duty and hard work ; art and an approving conscience ; these had once appeared to her abundant materials out of which to compose a rich and satisfactory existence.

But it was strange how meagre and insufficient the result appeared, now that she had really undertaken the task. Duty looked remarkably angular ; work was singularly barren ; and art had lost half its flavour. After having deliberately driven Mark away, with all the unreason of a woman in love, she was piqued at his continued absence. And having finally reached the point of persuading herself that he had never really cared for her at all, she became more than ever anxious to quit the scene of her struggles and her humiliations.

Sitting alone in the little drawing-room, so lately full of guests, all grateful for the silence as she was, she felt pathetically lonely. She had made up her mind to start without delay for Paris, had put forward her preparations: and now that her departure seemed imminent, a hundred problems presented themselves.

She could not disguise from herself that if she severed her life from Sir John, the obligation of separating from Mrs. Russell was no whit less potent. In the first glow of her resolution, even that had seemed easy—or, at least, easier than to accept longer any share in Sir John's bounty. But now, in the rush of new-born longing for the love and sympathy that she had despised, her heart was wrung at the thought of parting from Mr. Russell.

"A telegram, miss," said a servant, rousing her from her mournful meditations.

With a quick prescience of evil, she tore it open and read: "Come at once. Your uncle is worse and wishes for you. Mary Russell."

Winifred's arms fell to her side. Was this the answer to all her doubts? Had death taken upon itself to solve her problems?

Awakened fully again to action, she hurried up stairs, and resumed her half-completed preparations for departure. In the midst of them, she was called downstairs again: "Miss Dallas wished to see her."

This was the first messenger to herself from The Limes that had crossed the doors for three weeks; and Winifred went down with a beating heart to receive her visitor.

"We have also had a telegram," said Gertrude, coming forward to meet her with her usual cool grace. "The man said he had left another here. And as I guessed that you would be starting immediately, I thought I might as well come round to say good-bye. Mark—Mr. Hatherley, I mean—sends you this letter."

Mark! It was a mere accident that Gertrude called him by his Christian name, and yet the familiarity from her struck coldly on Winifred's heart. It was equally an accident, although this also she could not know, that Gertrude had been the bearer of the letter. Mark had gone to London early in the morning, and before leaving had given it to a servant to deliver. The servant had forgotten it until the moment when Gertrude herself was starting to pay her visit. She had then seen it in his hand and offered to take it. All this she never thought of explaining, any more than it occurred to her to say that Mark knew nothing of the telegram, and had written his letter hours before it arrived.

Doing her best to hide all agitation from Gertrude's penetrating eyes, Winifred opened the letter.

"MY DEAR MISS POWER,—Your silence and your absence during the past three weeks lead me to the reluctant conclusion that your resolution is unaltered. I must deplore this fact, but I cannot, of course, again contest it. All I wish to say is that, much as I

must continue to differ with you in regard to Miss Freake, I still cannot deny to that unfortunate lady the pity due to her from me as a monomaniac and a kinswoman of my own. And I should consequently wish you to use for her benefit, if necessary, the cheque which I enclose. I know that she is old and poor, and these facts, with the other attendant circumstances, constitute a claim upon my help. If at any time she needs further pecuniary assistance, be kind enough to apply to me.

Yours truly,

“MARK HATHERLEY.”

That was all. A cold offer of money, tantamount to a final farewell to herself! This was how Winifred read the letter, helped to her conclusion by the contrast between Mark's indifferent tone and her own present state of agitated sorrow; by the irritation of Gertrude's presence and her watchful glance; and by the unreasonable conviction that Mark had chosen the moment of her grief, to emphasise his cold disapproval of her conduct. Very foolish and unjust of Winifred! But secret struggles, unspoken love and unshared broodings are very morbid counsellors, and for so many days now she had borne unaided the triple burden of her thoughts.

In reply, she wrote:

“If my partisanship of Martha Freake constitute an injustice on my part towards her kinsfolk, then it is not fair that I should be the dispenser of their generosity. I doubt if she would accept your bounty. But should she at any time be so inclined, it will be fitter that she should ask you for it herself.”

She signed this letter, enclosed the cheque in it, and handed it in silence to Gertrude.

“I hope you have not written anything foolish?” said that young lady, with her usual penetration.

“I have written as I thought best,” was the cold reply.

Gertrude twisted the letter about, still keeping her eyes fixed on her companion.

“I cannot help thinking, Winifred, that you are making rather a mess of your affairs,” she resumed, with the air of dispassionate common-sense which she had inherited from her father, and which Mr. Dallas and his daughter alike put forth when considering other people's business.

“You must allow me to be the best judge of that question,” Winifred answered, gently, still bent on keeping her at arms' length from all her quivering wounds.

Gertrude looked disappointed. She had come, impelled partly by a survival of affection for her friend, partly by a characteristic conviction of her own superiority in all practical matters, partly to make Winifred speak; and then, as she would have expressed it, “to set things straight.” But against this impassive and obstinate reserve she could do nothing; so with a shrug of her shoulders, she changed the subject.

"I want principally to speak to you about Dolly. It seems she actually wishes to go with you to Paris. She took me aside, and, with a portentous air of mystery and heroism, announced her doughty determination. You have 'made a school,' Winifred, as the French say. All the young ladies in the place will soon be wanting to be inde pendent and unconventional," concluded Gertrude, with her easy impertinence.

Winifred looked at her, not unamused. It was comic indeed to hear Miss Dallas express herself in this tone of impartial criticism.

"She said she could not stand Florence any longer; and she hinted, with as much clearness as her somewhat rudimentary ideas of politeness would allow, that she was not precisely devoted to me," continued Gertrude, with a light laugh. "She added that she was no longer wanted at The Limes (I wonder if she really believes she ever *was* wanted); she asked me to intercede for her with Sir John, and was good enough to express the flattering conviction that I was more likely than anybody else to obtain his consent."

"Of course you denied this?" said Winifred. She could not have helped the little sarcasm for the world.

"No," replied Gertrude placidly, "I quite agreed with her. If I had not been afraid of hurting her feelings, I might have added that an intercessor is superfluous when a prayer is welcome. As a matter of fact, Sir John seems extremely pleased at the notion of letting Dorothy go."

"And Mrs. Hatherley?"

"Mrs. Hatherley weeps. But what of that?"

"Gertrude!" Winifred looked reproof, and Gertrude—laughed.

"Dolly must follow me," mused Winifred. "I will see, as soon as I can, what arrangements can be made for her."

"I wish I knew if Sir John really intends to provide handsomely for his nieces," observed Gertrude as she rose to go.

"Why?"

"Because in that case, Dolly's idea of going to Paris might turn up trumps for Dick."

"Gerty," exclaimed Winifred, "you seem really fond of Dick. Why are you fond of nobody else?"

Quite suddenly, to Winifred's intense amazement, the tears rushed to Gertrude's eyes.

"Why are almost all lives a failure?" she said bitterly. "You are a good creature, Winifred. Are you happy yourself?"

And without a word of farewell, she turned and left her.

As Miss Dallas re-entered the hall of The Limes, she was conscious of a certain unusual stir. The servants looked a little grave, while from the open door of the library issued the sound of voices in high discourse. Made aware in some way of her return, Dorothy and her sister came tumbling out upon her like a pair of eager young seals.

"Oh, Miss Dallas!" cried both in a breath. "What do you think has happened? The beautiful Psalter has been stolen!"

"Stolen?—the Psalter?" exclaimed Gertrude. "Impossible! Who would steal it?"

"That is what we are all asking," said Florence. "Mr. Archer came round to look at the books. And when my uncle took out the Psalter case, he found it empty."

At this moment Mrs. Hatherley appeared, coming out of the library with her usual stealthy tread. "Sir John would be glad to see you, Miss Dallas. He is in consternation at his loss."

There was a slight but perceptible sneer in her tone, as though she would insinuate that Sir John thought nobody could bring him consolation but the governess. Gertrude hurried into the library. The master of it was sitting in his usual chair, his brow resting on his hand. Beside him on the table lay the case open and empty. Mr. Archer, flushed and fussy, sat talking eagerly, first to one person, then to another; while Mark, just home from London, stood upright in front of the fire, listening with a grave air of concern.

"It is really the most inconceivable thing!" cried Mr. Archer. "You are certain that nobody but yourself has the key of the case?"

"As certain as that I sit here," answered Sir John.

"And do you always keep it by you?"

"In the daytime it is in my pocket. At night it lies on a table beside my bed, in company with my watch and other keys."

"And you never leave it about?"

Sir John reflected. "Perhaps I may have done so once or twice of late. As a rule I am very careful."

Mr. Archer was not satisfied. He evidently considered that he had a turn for detection.

"Have there been any strangers, inmates, in the house of late?"

"Nobody but Mr. Dallas," put in Mrs. Hatherley softly.

"*Mamma!*" exclaimed the incautious Dolly, indignantly making manifest the hidden point of her mother's observation.

"And who was he?" briskly inquired Mr. Archer.

"Hush!" interrupted Mark, with a concerned glance at Gertrude.

"Mr. Dallas was a most estimable young man, for a time my secretary, and this lady's brother.—Mr. Archer—Miss Dallas." Sir John performed the introduction with a bland severity full of majestic reproof. Mr. Archer sprang up, bowed, turned very red and glanced testily at Mrs. Hatherley. What had the woman meant by her interruption? Between embarrassment and surprised admiration of Gertrude's beauty, he was speechless.

She fixed her splendid eyes upon him with a sad serenity, which completed his discomfiture, and swept slowly to a seat beside Sir John. Her whole air implied security, and, it might almost be said, possession. The master of the house turned towards her with even more than his usual suavity and laid his hand on her arm.

"Yours is the best head of all. You must help us to find the thief."

"Perhaps it would be as well, for poor Dick's sake, to explain to Mr. Archer why he stayed with you so short a time," said Gertrude: "and also that it is some time since he went away."

"I beg—I never meant—that is, I did not think—not necessary at all," stammered Mr. Archer, overwhelmed.

"Miss Dallas is quite right. Now I think of it I never exactly understood myself why Mr. Dallas did not remain longer with you, sir," said Mark, good-naturedly anxious to put everybody at ease.

"He went in the first instance to buy books for me at the Hague—that I think you all know. He did not come back to me, first, because he had some chance of employment there; and next, because his sister's—this young lady's—intelligence and zeal enabled her to undertake the completion of the task which he had begun," explained Sir John.

"But Mr. Dallas did not obtain that employment at the Hague," remarked Mrs. Hatherley, with an air of merely contributing her small quota to the general stock of information.

"No. He returned to Paris," said Gertrude curtly.

"Can you recollect how long it is since you last saw or handled the Psalter?" inquired Mr. Archer, perseveringly resuming the subject of the loss.

"I should say about two months. You can remember, perhaps?" added Sir John, turning to Gertrude. "It was the morning when I explained to you some peculiarities in the illuminations. We were speaking of the figure of January—represented by an old man sitting beside a fire."

"I remember. My brother was still here: I am not sure but he was in the room. Just at the moment Mrs. Hatherley came in with the telegram announcing her son's illness," spoke the governess promptly.

"Then it was the *very* day before Mr. Dallas left," exclaimed Mrs. Hatherley, swift as thought. But she quivered and turned pale; no one saw why: but the least allusion to her son always agitated her singularly.

"I recall every circumstance now," resumed Sir John. "You wanted money for your journey, Laura: you were going up in answer to the telegram. I went upstairs to get it, taking my keys with me. Miss Dallas left the library and you remained behind alone. When I returned I found that you had returned the Psalter to its case, and replaced it on the usual shelf. I then locked the book-case, as is my invariable habit."

"After looking to see if the Psalter were in the case?" Decidedly some imp of perverse speech had hold of Mr. Archer's tongue that day! He spoke impulsively, without thought of malice, then turned hot all over. Reflecting on the matter later, he could only account for

his preposterous question by an indescribable something in Sir John's voice which had seemed to him to suggest it.

"My sister-in-law had previously locked the Psalter-case, and she gave me the key on my return. You never left the room during my absence, did you, Laura?" asked Sir John, quietly turning to her.

"Of course I did not," she replied, almost hysterically. "I am sure I don't know what possessed me to put away the thing, or to touch it at all. Perhaps you would like to cross-question the children next?" Indicating her daughters with a gesture, she rose, trembling and livid with rage, and turned towards the door. Mr. Archer was too repentant even to attempt an apology. He sat staring straight in front of him, like a man distraught, while Flossie heaped coals of fire on his head by taking her usual refuge in tears.

"Come back, aunt," interposed Mark with kindly peremptoriness, striding across the room and arresting Mrs. Hatherley's departure. "Sit down and talk quietly, can't you? And, Flossie, stop crying, there's a good child."

"How can you be such a goose?" confidentially asked Dolly of her sister, herself looking like a little fighting-cock the while.

"We are losing time," continued Mark. "Some measures ought to be taken immediately. What do you mean to do, father?"

Sir John did not answer. He had not seen the Psalter since that day.

"Advertise," suggested Gertrude. "The police ——"

"I will have nothing to do with the police," interrupted Sir John. "I have no opinion of them. They make a mess of everything."

Mark looked at him with a puzzled air. He had never heard him speak in that manner of the police. "Father, in this case it seems to me that our only chance of discovery lies with Scotland Yard."

"That may be your opinion, Mark. It is not mine. I hold that police interference would be either unnecessary or *inconvenient*," said Sir John, laying especial stress upon the last word.

"*Inconvenient*?" repeated Mark in astonishment.

"We will suppose," quietly continued his father, "that one of the servants is the thief. He will probably have an associate who acted as receiver. Both these people are ignorant, and can have but a vague idea of the value of a thirteenth-century psalter: in fact, probably only stole it in the hope that I should offer a reward for its recovery, knowing I value it. They would not know where or to whom to offer it for sale, all they want is to get the reward. In that case, by offering £20, I should get my Psalter again."

"And would you then compound with felony by allowing the interesting thieves to come off scot free?" asked Mark gaily.

"If a knowledge of their identity were positively forced upon me, I would proceed against them. They would be all the easier to catch for the previous silence and security."

"But my dear father, where would be the silence if you advertise?"

"I shall not advertise unless my other plan fails, Mark. After prayers this evening, when all the household is assembled, I shall announce my loss: and promise the £20, with no questions asked, to the person who brings me back the Psalter."

"Well, I must go or I shall be late for dinner," said Mr. Archer, all in a hurry. He had no patience with fantastic plans. Mark accompanied him to the hall door, and helped him on with his great-coat.

"Tell me," suddenly said the fussy old gentleman, "what did your father mean by saying that the action of the police might be 'inconvenient?'"

"The word perplexes me as much as it does you," replied Mark.

Mr. Archer laid a confidential finger on the young man's arm.

"I should keep a sharp eye on that handsome governess, if I were you. The 'brother at the Hague' has somehow an outlandish sound. Moreover, she has very much the upper hand of your father; and it strikes me that he suspects somebody whom he chooses to shield."

Mr. Archer nodded and disappeared into the fog. Mark turned away from the door thoughtfully. He quite started when he found Gertrude standing in the hall. Had she heard Mr. Archer's warning? Mark's chivalrous instincts revolted at the idea.

"Pardon me," she said, in her graceful way. "I have a letter for you—an answer from Winifred, to yours. Of course, she starts to-night."

The young man dropped his eyes to avoid her gaze. But he could not hide the red flush that mounted to his cheek; and the affected carelessness with which he took the letter did not deceive Gertrude's keen, but, in this instance, friendly glance.

She had the tact to leave him immediately, and he was hardly alone before he tore open the letter. He bit his lip when he saw the returned cheque, and his brow darkened as he read. A second rebuff from her! Well, he would not expose himself to a third. She did not care for him, and she must go. It did not strike Mark Hatherley that after all he had never been very explicit in the declaration of his feelings; but when did a shy, proud man, rather reluctantly in love moreover, ever yet fail to throw the whole burden of that discovery upon the woman?

He crushed the letter together, thrust it into his pocket, and marched upstairs to dress for dinner in a very gloomy mood. He was intensely irritated against Winifred, and when he wrested his thoughts from her, they had no more pleasant subject to fall back upon than the theft of the Psalter and his father's inexplicable behaviour. Mr. Archer's warning, giving voice as it did to certain vague suspicions of his own, not as to the Psalter but as to the governess, made him uneasy. He was too generous definitely to accuse Gertrude or anybody else, even in thought; but he had found

his father's manner peculiar, and could not help thinking that there was a mystery behind it.

The sense that he could not altogether comprehend Sir John often pained Mark. Scrupulously upright himself, he was loth to attribute insincerity to others, and especially to his father. Like everybody else, he had been taught to admire, consider, and revere him, and being just as single-hearted as he was practical-minded, he took upon trust, deliberately, as it were, those finer qualities of intellect in the sage man which he had been taught to believe existed. Nevertheless as his own character, so full of rectitude and earnestness, developed, he had found his father increasingly difficult to fathom; and not un- rarely of late he had been startled by detecting in himself the heretical idea that possibly there was nothing to fathom after all! The conception of Sir John as essentially shallow presented itself indeed as the easiest solution of all perplexities; but from this abrupt destruction of the fetish of years, Mark strongly shrank.

Everybody, except Sir John the master, was absent-minded that evening at dinner. Before the servants of course nothing could be said of the stolen Psalter, but the thought of it was present in the mind of all. Mrs. Hatherley was extremely sulky, and had apparently been crying; Flossie looked scared; Dolly defiant; Gertrude excited. The scent of a mystery had intoxicated her already; she was wondering what would result to herself out of it all.

"Miss Power has started, I presume?" suddenly asked Sir John: and a movement, quickly repressed, of Mark's, showed that his mind had been turned in the same direction.

"Yes. Poor Winifred!" said Gertrude.

"You are very good to pity her," observed the master, stiffly.

"I pity her because she is so hot-headed," softly replied Miss Dallas.

"Then she will see your brother?" resumed Sir John.

"Of course." Gertrude looked up inquiringly as she answered—expecting some further remark; but none came. Dolly, who had turned a lively red at the mention of Dick, here put in officiously: "If you want anything taken to Mr. Dallas, Uncle John, you can give it to me when I go to Paris."

"I want nothing taken," was the reply, rather sharply uttered. "And I am not sure that I shall allow you to go to Paris."

Dolly's small "flower-like" face (a very round flower) lengthened considerably.

"You must let her go, sir, now that your consent has once been given," interposed Mark, kindly. "I might take her myself. I—I suppose either you or I ought to be near my aunt if her husband dies."

At the utterance of this unexceptionable sentiment, a glance of demure amusement brightened Gertrude's eyes.

The evening passed heavily; but not for that did Sir John ring the

bell any earlier than usual for prayers. He always read these himself, in a very solemn and refined manner: and on this occasion he was more impressive than ever.

All the servants, from the highest to the lowest, were present—that being the rule at The Limes. As Sir John read, or rather recited, his eyes wandered slowly over the kneeling groups; and Dolly, watching him furtively with a kind of fascination, wondered if this penetration were discovering the thief. Prayers over, everybody rose, and the housekeeper had already curtsied and turned towards the door, her subordinates preparing to follow her, when Sir John, with a gesture of his hand, arrested the exodus.

"I have something to say to you all. Will you be good enough to remain," he said courteously. A little stir of respectful astonishment ensued; then everyone stood still.

"I wish," began the master, "to convey to the knowledge of my entire household an unpleasant incident which has just been discovered. I have lost one of my books—a very rare and old book which I kept in a locked case. The case is there, the volume is gone. I value it principally for associations superfluous to explain, and which—ah—some of you might fail to understand. I might, of course, put the matter immediately into the hands of the police, with the result—" here Sir John, amid a breathless silence, paused and let his glance wander slowly among his auditors—"with the result that the house would be searched from top to bottom. I am unwilling to put this slight upon you, and I would prefer never to know the truth, rather than impute a theft to any one of you. We will say, then, for the present that the book has not been stolen; only lost—misaid, you know. Whoever finds it and brings it back to me shall receive a reward of £20."

The effect of these words upon the listeners was for the most part uniform. The majority simply stared; and, if appearances were to be trusted, showed all the curiosity and amazement of entire ignorance.

Only Kelly, the butler, looked a little nervous and startled. He stepped out of the group and turned towards Mrs. Hatherley, seeming anxious to catch her eye. But if his object were to appeal to her in any way, it was frustrated by her demeanour. For she sat quite motionless, pale and with angry eyes, glancing neither to the right nor to the left, and taking no notice of anybody.

Meanwhile, the housekeeper, having of course a pet aversion among her underlings, the kitchen maid, had fixed a terrific gaze upon this victim and seemed much disappointed at eliciting nothing.

But it behoved the housekeeper's responsible position to speak, so she respectfully asked what the missing book might be like. Sir John described it accurately—its size—appearance—nature: even its value.

"I should recommend a thorough search, sir," said Mrs. Heath.

"I will not have it," returned her master, briefly.

"Not at all?" interrupted Mark, in surprise.

"Not for the present."

"Then, sir," said Mrs. Heath, after an uncomfortable and embarrassed pause, "I think we had better go. Mr. Kelly and me, we will talk the matter over."

"Do so." And Sir John bowed as suavely to his departing household, as though it had been a deputation and he Prime Minister.

"I don't think you will have gained much by that move, father," spoke Mark, half-impatiently, when the last servant had departed.

Sir John put the tips of his white fingers together and sat thinking. But he answered nothing.

The others stood about looking at one another, finding little to do, less to say; yet not liking to go to bed and so close the mystery for that night.

Suddenly there came a discreet tap at the door, and the timid faces of two of the servants presented themselves: the kitchen-maid and the under-housemaid. They stood in awkward silence, looking scared and timid.

"Have you anything to tell me?" inquired Sir John, condescendingly.

"If you please, sir," began the housemaid, "Mary, here, and me, we think, only we have not much liked to talk about it, that there is something very queer in the upper story of this house."

"Really, Susan?" rejoined their master, suppressing a smile. "Explain yourself."

"For some time past, sir, we have heard strange noises at night," continued Susan, her manner and voice most mysterious—and there she stopped.

"Noises?" repeated Sir John.

"They must be rats," interposed Mark.

"No, sir!" and Susan shook her head decidedly. "They are not rats. Rats don't give great yells, sir, and laugh out like mad people."

There was a moment's astonished silence. Mrs. Hatherley made so sudden a movement that she brought a book off the table with a great crash to the floor.

Sir John, with unwonted politeness, went over to pick it up for her. "Your teeth are chattering with cold," he said. "Why don't you draw nearer the fire?" But somehow his tone was alive with curiosity.

Mark, still incredulous, was accusing Susan of being subject to nightmare.

"But Mary heard the noises also, sir," she declared. And Mary, thus challenged, told a marvellous story. The noises were there, she said, and very frightful.

"We will go upstairs and have a look round," said Sir John. While everybody else appeared to be unbelieving, excited or scared, he, strangely enough, seemed positively pleased. There was quite an unusual briskness in his manner and tone; not a trace of invalid

languor left. He moved towards the door and they prepared to follow. Then all at once, with a sobbing wail of despair, Mrs. Hatherley threw herself in front of him and barred the way.

"John," she cried, terrified and imploring, "I entreat of you not to go."

"Why not?" questioned Sir John, sternly.

"There is no danger, mamma," urged Dolly.

"I never knew such a fuss about nothing," said Mark, amused.

Mrs. Hatherley shivered and moaned in a speechless piteous way, like a frightened animal. Her wraps had fallen from her. She stood cowering beneath her brother-in-law's eyes, cruel now: a slender, small, livid woman; the picture of abject supplication.

"I intreat of you not to go," she repeated: and a chorus of "Why not?" broke out.

"No, no!" she persisted, and wrung her hands.

"Let me pass," commanded Sir John, taking her by the wrist and putting her aside.

"You will find William there. He is ill; dying, perhaps. Oh John, forgive me!" And she sank on her knees in front of him.

Sir John gave a short laugh; it sounded to her one of mocking exultation. "I suspected as much," he said. "Then William shall be driven out like any other wretched intruder." And again he tried to push past her.

"To-morrow he shall go," cried the mother, clinging to him. "But not to-night, John; oh, not to-night! He is ill, I tell you; very ill." She might as well have spoken to a rock.

Mark went over and raised her compassionately. "We will go and see what can be done," he said quietly. "After all, he cannot be punished; or you either. He has not committed any crime."

She began crying hysterically, a little comforted by his words, but incapable of reasoning. Evidently, terror of Sir John overpowered in her every other thought.

"How much longer is this farce to be continued?" demanded Sir John, in angry tones. "Mark—Laura—let me pass. The servants are to come with me upstairs."

The butler, as if in answer to this summons, suddenly appeared at the door. He had apparently been lurking in the hall, and looked rather pale and disturbed. The whole party then, though for the most part uninvited, proceeded up the warmly carpeted and lighted stairs to the dimmer and barer regions of the garret.

"Listen!" cried Susan, and raised her hand.

(To be continued.)

WILKINSON PROUT.

A Sketch.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "OUR AMATEUR CONCERT."

I HAVE known Wilkinson Prout ever since we were boys at the Greycoats' School. And our friendship has never flagged or cooled since; though I am now a steady-going, prosaic young fellow well on in my twenties and employed as a corresponding clerk to the firm of Bristow, Bradbury and Bayliss: while he, scorning such low and vulgar occupation, elected, some time since, to "live on his muse." I quote his own words here.

His words, however, are not quite justified by events. For his muse, transcendent female though she may be, has hitherto politely but resolutely declined to do anything towards supporting him: nay, to put even the smallest coin into his pocket. And were it not for a legacy left him by a deceased aunt (a legacy yielding just £100 a year), Wilkinson Prout could never have elected to live the life of lettered leisure so dear to his soul.

When, at eighteen years of age, he and I left school, his genius was but budding. He only resorted to his pen as an amusement, and meekly followed his father's commands, which placed him upon a high stool in the counting-house of Prout and Son, Sugar Brokers, of Mincing Lane. There he continued, growing more and more discontented with, and contemptuous of, his quill-driving and figure-adding, for five long years. At the end of that time he gave his feelings vent, told his father and elder brother that he was "meant for higher things," and cut the concern.

"Then you may starve!" roared old Prout. The old gentleman was angry and did not pause to choose his words. "If you throw away the opening I've given you, you may try to live on your Aunt Rebecca's hundred a year, for not a farthing will you ever have from me, now or hereafter—and not a farthing will your fool's scribbling ever bring you in."

So Wilkinson Prout left his father's house of business, took some dingy lodgings, and commenced forthwith to "give himself up," as he said, without other distractions or sordid employment, "to the voice within him!" At his request I took up my abode with him. Lodging together was cheaper for both of us. That is now a whole year ago.

Poor Wilkinson! I could not help admiring the ease and cheerfulness with which he gave up the luxuries, and even the comforts, he had been accustomed to when in the receipt of a good salary from his

father. I could but wonder why people cannot always gauge their own talents and abilities as well as their friends can do it for them.

Wilkinson Prout fully believed (and believes, for the matter of that,) himself to be on a level with our most popular writers, living and deceased. When first freed from the trammels of office-work, he sat writing day and night, and every evening I would be entertained with the result of that day's labour. After he had done reading to me, he would begin to talk. "You see," he would say, "I differ from other writers in one respect: I can do everything!" Here he would frown, and, leaning on his hand, gaze into the fire: "Poetry, prose, sketches of character, comic and pathetic writing, dramas, tragedies, all come equally easy to me. There is my difficulty! Which am I to take up with in real earnest? Upon which am I to expend all the life and fire of my genius?" To which, after a slight cough, I would answer: "Well, whichever goes down best with the editors, and publishers, and *those* people." A moody silence would follow this, and Wilkinson would gaze sternly into the coals. "Editors and publishers are fools!" would burst out then: "It's a well-known fact that *they* are the worst enemies a man of genius has!"

And, indeed, it seemed so—the latter statement, that is. I quite began to think they must be a terrible class of men from the way Wilkinson went on. Nothing, of all the countless productions in various styles, that he had sent to editors and publishers had ever been accepted! Not one of the dramas, tragedies, and farces that he had taken to managers had been favourably received: and one gentleman in the theatrical line had threatened proceedings if he was annoyed any more!

"Yes," Wilkinson Prout would say, "I can do everything! My difficulty with this *embarras de richesses* lies in the choosing. For instance now, Bob, here's a little thing I dashed off between the meat and pudding at my dinner to-day. Calculated, you know, to please the common mass of the people—for one must not always pass them over and ignore them. The sort of thing to suit a commonplace, inferior sort of intellect—like yours, old fellow. Listen. I call it:

FATE'S FATALITIES.

BY AN UNFORTUNATE YOUNG MAN.

In my morning departure to town,
If my "brolly" I chance to forget,
You may "plank" every "quid," you may bet your own head
The weather will turn pouring wet!

If I have on a shocking bad hat,
And, per causâ, sneak down a back way,
My luck is so sweet, I'm certain to meet
Every creature I know on that day!

When at a "small early" I sing,
 And hope to establish my fame,
 Some lady will thank, and add "Mr. Blank
 "Sang that charmingly *just ere you came!*"

One specimen more ere I close,
 'Tis fortune's last dismallest frown,
 If I e'er drop a nice and well-buttered slice,
 It's certain to fall butter down!

"There! What d'you say to that?"

"Oh! Pretty well! Sounds something like a music-hall song, doesn't it?"

"Does it? Well, I don't know. However, I don't set much store by it. I only wanted to show you how versatile I am. Here's another thing I made, ten minutes after, in just the opposite style. I should like this set to music. Gounod's, I think, would be fairly suitable. It's called

NIGHT.

Come Night! Come awful Night! Oh! Night, come, come!
 And wrap me in thine awful sable wings,
 Come, with thy sightless eyes and voices dumb!
 Come! Thou most awful of all awful things!

I stand amid the grievous twilight grey,
 Waiting thee, Night; I gaze on yon pale star;
 Reluctantly the twilight fades away,
 'Tis you at last, Oh, Night—And there you are!

"What d'you think of that?"

"We—ell!—I suppose it's all right. But aren't there too many 'awfuls' in it?"

"Ha! Ha! It's no good asking your opinion, Robert Brett! And it's no good getting angry with you. If you've no literary tastes or talents, it's your failing, not your fault."

"Come, I say! You needn't be so rough on me! How does the three-volume novel get on?"

"Famously! To-day I wrote the great scene when the lovers finally part. Wait a bit! I'll get it in one second. Ah! Here it is! You remember where I left off, don't you?"

And then I was in for a hundred pages or so of MS.

I have given these poetical extracts from my friend's works just to let you find out his value for yourselves; also to show you what manner of man he was to lodge with. Whenever I was not engaged out, my evenings were passed hearing these choice productions read aloud. I regret that want of space prevents my quoting any of his more lengthy specimens of prose. There were other drawbacks, too, to one's comfort in sharing a roof-tree with Wilkinson Prout: though I do not intend to deny that the reading aloud was the chiefest annoyance.

We occupied the ground floor—consequently the hall-door was

rather near our sitting-room. In that hall-door was a letter-slit—he had had it enlarged to suit his purpose—through which the correspondence of the household tumbled on to the hall mat. A manuscript is generally rather a heavy thing. Need I say more? Wilkinson Prout wrote voluminously—and wrote unsuccessfully. The constant “thud” of rejected communications on a hall mat has an ominous and fearful sound, and is calculated to irritate and depress others besides the party most immediately concerned.

Another thorn in the flesh was that old Prout was in the habit of dashing up to our lodgings periodically in a hansom, and having a thorough set-to with Wilkinson in our parlour.

I like to have things nice and ornamental about me. Most of the little knick-knacks in the sitting-room were of my purchase; and old Prout never came without breaking at least *one* thing in the heat of his fury. Of course, he was always too angry and preoccupied to think of paying for the things he broke: besides, I expect he thought they were bought by Wilkinson, and consequently would be glad rather than otherwise.

It was one day, shortly before last Christmas, that I, returning home to Keppel Street in the evening from business, saw, with a sigh of resigned martyrdom, an empty hansom standing outside our house.

“Old Prout again!” I muttered vindictively. “Deuce take him!”

I entered. Yes! sure enough there were the voices raised high in dispute in the front parlour. Determined not to announce my presence and make a third at the quarrel, as I had sometimes been drawn into doing, I sneaked quietly into my bed-room, which was just behind the parlour and communicated with it by folding doors. I took off my top-coat, and sat patiently down to wait, thinking in my own heart, “After Christmas, catch me living with Wilkinson any longer!”

The battle in the next room raged briskly. “Will you listen to reason, you young fool? And take your place in the counting-house once more, before your mother breaks her heart?”

“I will not! My mother will not dream of breaking her heart because I choose to follow the monitions of my inward self. I tell you, father, once for all, business is repugnant to me. I wish to go forth a voice into the centuries?”

“I’m a precious good mind to make you go forth a voice into the street, and a pretty loud one too, by giving you a thorough thrashing!” returned old Prout, hardly able to speak for rage.

A silence, during which I could hear the breathing of the disputants quite audibly, and could fancy their mutual glares.

Old Prout was the first to speak again: “It isn’t even as if you were earning anything by your beggarly craft,” he said, “though I should consider it disgraceful then—but I know it for a fact that even in *this* grovelling pursuit you are uniformly unsuccessful!”

As if to confirm, illustrate and give point to this cruel speech there came at this moment a brisk postman's rap at the door, followed by the click of the letter-slit, and thud! thud! thud! thud! on the hall mat.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" laughed the unfeeling father, as he heard the sounds and took in their meaning. "Wasn't I right? What's that come thumping into the hall but a lot of your returned rubbish?"

And then he went off ranting and raving, and I heard, with a groan, what I knew to be my precious little Worcester cup, knocked down and smashed. Presently he grew calmer again, and once more my ear caught his words, as I leaned my head wearily against the bed-room wall, and wondered when he'd go, and I should be able to get my tea. "It makes me mad," he was saying, "madder than ever to think of you, when I've so much to be proud of in your brother George."

"Ahem!" coughed Wilkinson.

"Yes—you may say 'ahem' as often as you please, but if you had half George's brains and nous, you'd be worth something!"

"Is George suddenly developed into a genius, then, sir? He was certainly not at all like one last time I saw him."

"A genius! What d'you mean by that impertinence? He's a clever man of business, and a good, steady fellow! He's a comfort to his mother and me, instead of a sorrow! And he's been engaged a week to Miss Benbanks, the heiress!"

There was a pause after the launching of this broadside, and then Wilkinson laughed slightly, and said: "I see, now, why George is so suddenly stuck upon a pedestal to be worshipped! So he's secured the great fortune, has he? I thought he'd try for her when I first heard she was staying with you down at the Court. Well, father, I don't envy him."

"No, of course you don't, because you're a fool! Of course there's nothing enviable in having secured a pretty, bright, clever young wife, with £5,000 a year, if she has a penny."

"Oh! If she's pretty and bright, that alters the case. I don't know her, you see, sir—and as to being a fool, as you've called me so often this afternoon——"

Here his parent interrupted him and took up the tale: "I came to tell you this to shame you out of your miserably grovelling pursuits. For the last time, will you come back to your post in Mincing Lane?"

"For the last time, father, no! I am not at liberty to slight my inward promptings! I shall be an honoured man of letters! Vacancies are coming in the literary world. George Eliot is dead, and Tennyson is almost written out—I shall supply the place of both!" There was a slight pause; and then, gathering together his powers for the final smashing volley, Wilkinson spoke these terrific words: "I'll tell you what, father. If I'm not left to follow my Art in peace—I'll turn Roman Catholic and lead a dissipated life!"

Old Prout was a staunch Dissenter : and a strict and puritanic wholesale dealer, to boot. He was evidently stunned by the overwhelming threat. For some seconds there was silence. Then I heard him take up his hat, make a hasty exit—the street-door banged, and the cab-wheels audibly rolled away.

Sometime after this visit, Wilkinson received a letter from his brother. It contained the news of that gentleman's speedily approaching nuptials : many lover-like mentions of "dearest Deborilla" :—(Miss Benbank's Christian name), a hope that Wilkinson would spend the coming Christmas at Bilbury Court, and stay for the wedding, which was to take place the second week in January : and an invitation for myself to do the same.

Neither Wilkinson nor I had ever seen the bride-elect. But from him I learned that her father had been, in by-gone years, a city friend of old Prout ; that he had migrated in the pursuit of his commercial career to the West Indies, while his daughter and only child was a mere baby ; that he had lost his wife out there, and a little over a year ago had quitted this mortal stage himself, leaving the fair Deborilla, at three and twenty, the greatest heiress in Port L—.

The Benbanks had no near relatives ; and on his death-bed, Paul Benbanks, who had for nearly twenty years kept up a desultory correspondence with his old friend Joshua Prout, managed to indite a feeble letter, asking that Deborilla might have a home—a temporary one, at least—at Bilbury Court, on her return to England ; for he had expressed a wish that after his death she should return to her native country. He died a day or two later, and shortly afterwards Deborilla Benbanks sailed for England.

She was received at Bilbury Court with open arms : not *all* on account of her wealth, for they are kind-hearted people. But still they have the commercial knack of thinking there's nothing *quite* so nice as money. And, of course it *is* rather a different thing, receiving a disconsolate orphan with £5,000 a year into your house, from receiving the disconsolate orphan with nothing but the clothes she stands up in. However that may be, and not pausing to inquire too curiously into the feelings which animated Joshua Prout and his wife as they welcomed the heiress, to Bilbury Court she came ; and there she had been living some six months.

"George has lost no time, anyhow," said Wilkinson. "Well, I don't grudge him his happiness and his heiress. I suppose I shall have to spend Christmas at the Court and stay for the wedding. Do you care to come, too?"

I said "Yes," and we spoke on the subject no more.

The time that intervened between the receipt of George Prout's letter and our departure for the Court was one of more mental activity than ever for Wilkinson. On my return from business I would find him almost smothered in manuscript.

There was no subject, it seemed, on which he did not touch. I

actually found a sheet of paper on the floor one morning, containing a poem headed, "To R—— B——" (my name is Robert Brett), and commencing, "Friend of my careless boyhood's hour, and friend of manhood's years." Just think of that! He must have exhausted every other theme before he lighted on *me*! I felt quite shy about it. I had no idea he liked me so much as the poem made out. Next time we met I was so polite to him that it was almost painful. I wanted to keep up the good opinion he evidently had of me. The evening of the day I found the poem, however, he called me a fool at tea because we had run out of butter; and I learned then that poets may love you very dearly in verse, and be uncommonly short with you in prose.

I was lucky enough to get more than a fortnight's holiday at Christmas; and, on the eve of that festival, Wilkinson and I set off for Bilbury Court. It is only about twelve miles from London; so half an hour's railway journey brought us to Dodstone station, whence one of the Prout chariots speedily conveyed us to the Court.

The dressing-bell was ringing when we got there, and, after a great scurry to change my things and get into dress-clothes, I descended to the drawing-room. There was a number of people in the great apartment. I looked round for the faces I knew.

"Hallo, Bob, old chap," said George Prout, as he spied me out. "Glad to see you. Wilkinson's come, I suppose?"

I said he would no doubt be down directly, and George straightway cantered me off to a sofa near one of the fire-places, on which were seated Mrs. Prout and a fair-haired young lady with bright, brown eyes and an uncommonly pleasant face. Mrs. Prout welcomed me as kindly as ever, and George, then, with much pomp and circumstance, presented me to the young lady, whom, of course, I had already guessed was Miss Benbanks.

"Well, Bob," cried old Prout, approaching the coterie. "You're very welcome, my boy, very welcome," and he grasped my hand heartily. "Have you been introduced to Miss Benbanks?—Ah! Of course!—George is only too anxious to bring everyone to the Court to envy him his luck."

"Mr. Prout! I won't be flattered so! Positively I *won't*!" cried the lively heiress. "George, if you allow me to hear such things said, I shall get perfectly intolerable!"

"I'm not afraid," said George. "I know you better than you know yourself, Deborahilla."

The lovers continued this tender theme in a low voice, and old Prout nudged me rather more than I cared about, and watched them with a complacency I found a trifle offensive. I therefore moved away.

At this moment Wilkinson entered the room. He was not looking his best—and at his best he was really a good-looking, well-made, presentable fellow. His hair had the appearance of having been arranged with his fingers. His face was of a somewhat messy pallor.

His legs, I thought, looked shorter than usual, as he advanced up the apartment, glancing about him half-indifferently, half-shyly. His father caught sight of him. "Here he is! Here's the rising poet!" cried the old man, and I was really angry with him for it. "Come a little faster, man! Is there anything wrong with your legs? Let me present you!" continued the old gentleman. "Miss Deborilla Benbanks, will you let me introduce to you a young man who gave up a good situation in order to scribble nonsense and starve? This, my dear girl, is Joshua Wilkinson Prout—the fool of his family."

"Father," muttered Wilkinson, colouring angrily as he bowed, "It's a great deal too bad of you."

Miss Benbanks was very gracious: told Wilkinson she knew how fond his father was of joking: said she was delighted to know one she had heard so much about; and hoped, in a lower voice, that he would let her read some of his poetry and novels very soon.

"Thank you very much, dear, for being so kind to him." I heard the tender George say to his fiancée, as we went in to dinner. "Poor Wilkinson is very queer, of course, but I was going to ask you to be as kind to him as you could."

There were several guests staying in the house, besides a few people from the neighbourhood come to dine. Of the latter was a Miss Judd, who fell to me to take in. She was about forty, with a fringe, a silk dress that showed her ankles, and rather more rouge on one cheek than on the other. She had been invited, I supposed, solely in her character of neighbour, for I thought the old Prouts looked askance at her youthful decorations. She asked me so many questions at dinner that I got quite bewildered.

Finding me, I suppose, a trifle stolid and slow, she turned to her other neighbour, Walter Sharpe, a cousin of the Prouts, whom I had often met at the Court, and a bit of a wag. Him she plied with a similar torrent of questions to that with which she had overwhelmed me. At last I heard him say: "Oh! Miss Judd, I'm so hungry now! Would you mind writing down a list of your questions, and I'll let you have the answers to-morrow?"

We had to get through the evening as best we could. No dancing was countenanced at Bilbury Court. Miss Judd confided to Walter Sharpe and me that she thought it was "an awful shame." In households where this prejudice against dancing exists, the place of that amusement is taken by various terrible penances called games. In one room you would come upon a group of blighted beings playing Dumb-Crambo, or mortifying themselves with a dreary and frightful sport called by the initiated "Clumps."

I stumbled on Wilkinson in a state of collapse, waiting outside the drawing-room door. He said it was a game they were playing inside, and he had been sent out "to think of something." He had very little idea of what the game meant; he had been in the hall fifteen

minutes already, and his mind was still a perfect blank ; so, taking his arm, I went in with him and we found they had forgotten all about that game and were playing something else.

There were some feeble charades, in which several people twined antimacassars round their heads and looked foolish. There was also an attempt made at "Proverbs," started by Miss Judd. "What shall the proverb be?" asked the elderly coquette of Walter Sharpe, when some unfortunate creature had been driven out to perish in the hall. "Now, Mr. Sharpe, use your wits! It's very naughty of you young men not to try to make the evening go! Think of a proverb at once, Mr. Sharpe!" with a poke of the fan, and a most engaging air—half-imperious, half-beseeching. Walter thrust his hands in his pockets, and looked somewhat impudently in her face as he answered:

"Yes, Miss Judd; I've thought of one I think you'll like. What do you say to 'Man proposes?'"

The proverbs fell through.

We had some music. George Prout and Miss Benbanks sang a duet. Miss Judd played a fantasia, with long runs, and uninteresting shakes, and the air with the left hand and fireworks with the right. Walter Sharpe rattled through a medley of street-tunes, skilfully strung together by himself. And then old Prout said we were to sing a Hymn. A good many of the people would rather have been excused, I know; however, we all stood up, and the key-note was given. Wilkinson, who looked dreamy and tired, started the hymn too soon, and Walter Sharpe laughed audibly—calling down a stern reproof from old Prout. We got through the hymn—each verse being read out before sung: and shortly after, the party separated—those who were only guests of the evening going home—these who were staying at the Court departing to their rooms.

We had a cosy family Christmas. A good deal of kissing under the mistletoe, at which Walter Sharpe (he was to stop for the wedding, it seemed) proved himself a great adept; and in which Miss Benbanks was in much request—more request than George liked, I fancied. She was certainly a very nice girl; and, if she had not been an heiress and engaged already, I might have been a little smitten myself.

She was going to remain at the Court until her marriage, for she had no other home. The day before the interesting event George was to go to a neighbouring friend, from whose home he would drive to the church. This was all the concession they were going to make to the demands of etiquette. Perhaps it was a queer way of managing, but the Prouts are not conventional.

A day or two after our arrival at Bilbury Court, Wilkinson began to shut himself in his room, and work as hard as ever at his writing. The rest of the household took this rather ill, and old Prout commenced to lead the poor fellow an awful life. Each meal-time was a season of verbal castigation from the father, met by high-flown perorations or dignified silence from the son.

One night at dinner, a servant entered and handed a number of post parcels to Wilkinson.

"That stupid woman in Keppel Street!" he muttered angrily. "What is she sending the things on for?" Poor Wilkinson! His face grew red, for he knew all eyes were on him, and that everyone was aware it was a number of his fatal rejected MSS., which our landlady had too conscientiously forwarded. He looked defiantly up at his father, whose wicked twinkling old eye was on him. "You needn't suppose I care!" he cried. "I'm not the first man of genius whom it has taken time to be appreciated!" And he left the room.

Wilkinson appeared no more that night. In the drawing-room I heard Miss Benbanks and her lover talking about him. "I am so sorry he is shutting himself up like this," George said. "It must seem so odd to you, darling; and I fear too, he is having an unhappy visit. I wish you would try to persuade him to spend at least his evenings in the drawing-room."

"I will try if you wish it, George. But you must not imagine that because my persuasions might have weight with—you—that they would influence others."

"I am sure you could do a great deal with Wilkinson—poor fellow; he is very queer. If you could persuade him to come amongst us every evening, that would be *something*. Will you try, dearest, for my sake? Will you do all you can with him?"

"I will, George. I will certainly try."

Accordingly, next morning, after breakfast, when Wilkinson had gone out to take his usual solitary morning stroll among the leafless trees, I saw the pretty, well-furred figure of the heiress encounter him as if accidentally. They spoke for some minutes and then continued their walk together. I fancied, though, that she was having a heavy job to make him talk, and that he would have preferred his solitary musings. George Prout watched them complacently from the window of the breakfast-room, and said half-aloud: "I believe she'll be able to make another man of him!"

She seemed pretty successful in her coaxings and persuasions. He spent that evening in the drawing-room. And, though he crouched about on sofas, thinking till his forehead was quite like macaroni, yet it was an improvement, no doubt. He continued to spend his evenings downstairs after this.

I could but think, as the time went on, that Miss Benbanks had shown great address in weaning Wilkinson from his hermit-like seclusion. As the wedding-day approached he threw off his usual melancholy manner, and at times was quite gay and excited.

"Take my word for it, father," said George Prout, in exultation, "Deborilla will make another man of him. After she's his sister she'll have a right to reason with him on his folly, and laugh him out of it even more than she can now; and I haven't the least doubt she'll reform him so that we shall have him back in Mincing Lane soon."

"I don't know how to thank you, dearest," he said, another time, to his fiancée, "for your kindness in taking poor Wilkinson in hand. He is certainly coming back into his old self. Only I do hope, love, that in carrying out my wish to try and reform him, you are not tiring out your patience. I'm afraid he bores you terribly of an evening, with those endless conversations he inflicts on you, and those extracts from his works."

"Oh, I'm not easily bored, George," returned Deborilla. "And did I not promise to do all I could with him, for your sake?"

It was a merry time, the few days preceding the wedding. Presents came pouring in. The neighbourhood quite approved of the affair. An heiress with five thousand a year is certain to be overloaded with marriage-gifts, while her poorer sisters, who really need such proofs of kindness, have to be satisfied with a smaller and less costly array of presents. Each of the three bridesmaids had come provided with an appropriate offering. Old Prout gave a splendid silver tea and coffee service, with the monogram G. D. P. on every article. He also gave Deborilla an exquisite boudoir piano: a perfect little gem, all ebony and gilt. Mrs. Prout's presents were a set of pearls for the bride, and a very handsome study clock for her son.

If I enumerated all the offerings, or anything *like* all, I should trespass unwarrantably on the space allowed me, and weary you sadly, to boot, so I will content myself with saying that they made gorgeous array, set out in the small drawing-room—George's gift, a full suite of diamonds, flashing in its case from the place of honour. Miss Judd sent a white and gold drawing-room book. There was a bookmark in it, worked by herself with the words, "We shall meet in Heaven." Walter Sharpe, who had not been prepossessed in the lady's favour, said he wasn't at all so sure about that, at which the three bridesmaids fell into paroxysms of laughter. The bridesmaids had been just a week at the Court. Walter had made an impression on all three, I thought, and rather envied him his triple conquest. I felt just a little cut out, and considered that he might have left at least *one* for somebody else. I was not very much astonished, therefore, one dusk afternoon on my return from a walk, three days before the eventful Thursday, to hear in the shrubbery path, which ran parallel with that I was pursuing, and was separated from it by a high bank of evergreens, the report of a tender salute, followed by a remonstrance in a female voice.

George Prout was out, I knew; besides, he and his betrothed would have no need to sneak out into the garden on a January evening to exchange the kiss of peace. It was Walter Sharpe, I said to myself, up to his usual tricks. I hastened on, having no wish to play the spy; but before I was quite out of ear-shot, a few hurried, impassioned words were spoken by a man's voice, and the girl said: "It frightens me to think of it! It is so sudden! Oh, what will they say of me?"

"Well," I mused, as I entered the house, "Walter's carrying his flirtations into real earnest at last! Which of them has he proposed to, I wonder?" For his attentions had seemed pretty impartially divided among the three fair bridesmaids. I watched him that evening, to see which it was, and was fairly puzzled. He turned over the leaves of Blanche Perry's song, and looked languishingly in her face the while. "Oh! *She's* the one!" I thought. Lo! Five minutes afterwards he was sitting at a table, looking over a book of prints with Annie Stone, and I saw a small struggle beneath the rose-wood, in which Miss Annie, crimson in the face, was too evidently endeavouring to free her own hand from a stronger one. "Of course, then, *she's* the one!" I said. "That settles it!" But at eleven o'clock, when the ladies were retiring, I distinctly heard him say, as he wished Bertha Crawford good-night: "Why have you been so cold to me all the evening? Have I offended you, Bertha?" "Well, hang it!" thought I; "I give up trying to find out which it is! He must be going over to Salt Lake City!"

The night before the wedding. A gay party in the drawing-room. The bridesmaids have "tried on" their dresses and come down to be inspected. Very pretty they looked in them—dark crimson velvets with great tippets and small caps made of snow-white ostrich feathers. "A most piquant and stylish get-up for a winter wedding!" was the verdict of the lady judges. Walter Sharpe went into ecstasies over them.

Miss Benbanks seemed to take very little interest in the display. She was, not unnaturally on such a night, somewhat distraught and ill at ease. George hung over her assiduously. Old Prout plunged his hands in his pockets, and said he wanted a little more drilling in his part of giving the bride away. Wilkinson leaned on the mantel-shelf and gazed into the fire. He was rather flushed with poetic fancies; I thought some new idea must have occurred to him—a thrilling scene, perhaps, in the political novel he was writing.

We separated early: it being supposed that all our powers would be taxed to the utmost on the morrow.

The household at Bilbury Court was astir betimes in the morning. I was down at a little past eight; but found the breakfast-room as yet an unexplored region. The usual morning repast lay on the table, but no one was there to partake of it; so I made a hearty meal alone. Trays were being taken up to the rooms, in order that usually late risers might be able to get under weigh at once, and proceed with their toilettes as they breakfasted.

There was much to be done. The bridesmaids had to make their extensive toilettes, and then dress the bride. And the sacred edifice, at which Deborilla and George were to be made one, was a good half-hour's drive away.

I had nearly finished my solitary repast, when a considerable amount of feminine talking upstairs attracted my attention. I

listened for some time, and, at last my curiosity being roused, went to the open door of the breakfast-room to hear further.

Across the hall, the dining-room door stood wide, showing the glittering splendour of the wedding breakfast—a vast expanse of snowy damask and dazzling crystal and silver, varied by banks of exotic blooms whose fragrance came to me where I stood: and, rising from the centre, the gorgeous bride-cake. My attention was drawn from this attractive sight, however, by the voices above.

"You must be dreaming, Watkins; you went into one of the spare rooms by mistake."

"Indeed, miss, I did nothing of the kind! I suppose I know my mistress's room by this time! I carried up her tray and I knocked and knocked till I was tired; and then, thinking she must be still asleep, though it isn't often ladies oversleep on their wedding-day, I should say, I made bold to go in. And the room's empty! Go and see for yourself, Miss Perry, if you doubt my word."

"She must have gone for an early walk!" said the voice of Miss Blanche Perry.

"It must have been a very early one, then, miss, for the bed hasn't been slept in!"

At this point I made bold to ascend the stairs and inquire: "Is anything wrong, Miss Perry?" "Oh!" cried the young lady, "Watkins tells a queer story of Deborah's room being empty. And it's almost time to begin dressing her; what are we to do?"

I really could suggest nothing on the spur of the moment. If I had been Walter Sharpe I might perhaps have known what to do or say: but I was always slow. And Walter had gone away with George in the quality of best man (Wilkinson having from the first declined that office), so we should not see him again till we got to church.

At this moment a servant with a breakfast-tray came in sight at the end of the gallery. His face looked scared. "What's the matter, John?" I called out.

"Oh! sir," he said, "I took Mr. Wilkinson up his breakfast, and I knocked and he didn't answer, and I went in—and his room's empty, and the bed's not been slept in!"

For a moment we did not put the statements made by the two servants together. Then, Miss Perry gave a loud scream and came and clung to my arm.

In half a second the corridor seemed to be full of people. The two other bridesmaids, in different stages of their respective toilettes: old Prout in his shirt-sleeves; Mrs. Prout without her front; and several fogies who had arrived the day before for the wedding: all talking and scolding, and shouting, and finally setting off in a body for the bride's room, followed by a crowd of open-eyed servants.

It was a large, handsome apartment close at hand. We flocked round the door and looked in, as old Prout and Mrs. Prout and the three bridesmaids made an incursion. All still and quiet and orderly.

The blinds down before the three great windows. Long mirrors on every side reflecting the scared, wondering faces passing before them. On a couch at the side of the room the pearly satin robe, all clouded over with costly lace and garnished with orange-blossoms, which the bride should have been donning at that moment.

"Here's something!" cried the shrill voice of Miss Perry from the toilette-table: and she held up a note that she had unpinning from the cushion. "Directed to 'George Prout, Esquire.'"

"Give it me!" shouted old Prout. Then, turning to his wife: "Good heavens, Priscilla! She's jilted him!"

"Oh! if you please, sir," said John, edging his way into the room, "here's a note as I've found on Mr. Wilkinson's dressing-table. It's for Mr. George."

"Send for Mr. George at once," roared the old gentleman, as he took possession of both missives in his trembling hand. "Here! get out of the way all of you! Clear out! Get some water or something; here's my wife fainting!"

In a very few minutes a messenger had gone on the wings of the wind over to Heathcote, where George and his groomsman had spent the night; and in a very few more the sound of a dog-cart driving up at full speed was heard, and George Prout in his bridegroom's attire and ashy pale, came tearing up the stairs, followed by Walter Sharpe, very smart and very round-eyed and wondering.

"George, my dear boy," said the father, who seemed really upset, as he gave the son the two notes, "I'm afraid you've lost her!"

George tore open the letters; read a few lines, then dashed them to the ground—danced on them for a short time—and, with a cry of "I'll catch them yet!" rushed down the house, out at the front door, mounted the dog-cart, and drove off, as if for life.

Of course we picked up the letters and read them. We should hardly have been human else. Miss Benbanks' ran as follows:—

"MY DEAR GEORGE,—I know I am doing what will earn me much blame and reproach. I know it is a great deal too bad to leave you in the lurch like this: altogether inexcusable. But Wilkinson and I suddenly discovered, two days since, that we were all in all to each other; and there was nothing for it but the course we have taken. No doubt you will be mad against me at first; but I shall hope for your forgiveness in time: even though I tell you that I have had lately a lingering suspicion that my fortune was my chief attraction in your eyes; whereas Wilkinson loves me truly for myself.

"When you are inclined to blame me most fiercely, pray remember that, after all, I am but carrying out to the utmost your own wishes. You have said, so often, 'For my sake do all you can with the poor fellow!' I found I could do even more with him as his wife than I could as his sister; and so—I hope you will in time forgive

"DEBORILLA BENBANKS."

Wilkinson's epistle consisted of a verse of which the first two lines are all I can recollect just now. They were :

"I have stolen thy bride! My brother, forgive!
We found that, if parted, we never could live!"

It was certainly a galling thing for George to read that verse; and I sympathised heartily with him for about the first time in my life. To say that we were amazed at the trick Miss Benbanks and the poet had played us is to convey but a very faint and inadequate idea of our feelings. We were positively thunderstruck! The couple had, in the language of the stage, so completely, "kept back their business," that the elopement came upon us like a cannon-ball.

The morning of that strange day was spent by the pseudo wedding guests in moving blankly about the house and wondering if they ought to go or stay.

Mrs. Prout shut herself into her room. People who had meant to see the wedding and found there wasn't one, passed in little groups looking up at the windows: they couldn't get very near, luckily, for the grounds were pretty large. Miss Judd, in a very short dress, stood looking in through the railings of the garden for about half an hour; and then made inquiries at the kitchen-entrance: and hearing there was to be no wedding as the bride had run off, asked for her present back again.

Old Prout, I could not help seeing, even at that early period, was more inclined to admire than upbraid Wilkinson. Much as the father felt for his elder son; yet I was certain that in the paternal estimation, the "fool of his family" had risen many steps by his last freak—a whole flight at least. I suppose the old gentleman did not so much care who secured the heiress's fortune so long as it was kept in the family.

The fugitives were found to have escaped through the French window of the library, which opened on the garden. One of the servants came forward and spoke to having found the shutters open and the window unlatched, when she entered the room that morning.

George Prout returned late in the day fagged out, and so savage that the proverbial bear, whose head is in such an uncomfortable state, wasn't in it with him. Of course he had found no clue to the runaway couple.

I hastened to mentally absolve Walter Sharpe from the charge of carrying his flirtations to such serious lengths as I had believed him guilty of three days before. It was clear enough *now* who were the agitated pair in the shrubbery path that evening!

That is some months ago now. Mr. and Mrs. Wilkinson Prout occupy a charmingly romantic retreat on the banks of the Thames—up Richmond way.

The old Prouts have forgiven them (if they had anything to forgive, which remains a question) and visit The Laburnums pretty often.

It is a lovely place in summer weather, and I am thinking of accepting Wilkinson's pressing invitation to spend part of my holidays there next August.

Whether George Prout will ever be reconciled to his brother and his sister-in-law is a matter of uncertainty. He shows no signs of such a condition yet.

Not long since, in a first-rate publisher's list of "Works in Preparation," I lighted on "Poems: by Wilkinson Prout." He can bring his works before the public now that he is a man of means. Whether that vague and imposing Unknown Quantity will ever read them is its own look-out.

Last week I received a copy. It contained several things I had heard already, and some new matter—so much better than the old that I supposed his wife had been helping him. Turning over the pages I saw a good deal of "To my Mother," "To my Father," "To D——" "To the Same," "To the Same," "To a Friend," "Lines Written on Hearing my Uncle had Fallen Downstairs," and, to crown all, "To my Brother G——"

I should like to see George's face if he ever comes across that last poem!



A BIRTHDAY GREETING.

WHAT shall I wish thee for the coming year?
Twelve months of dreamlike ease? no care? no pain?
Bright spring—calm summer—autumn without rain
Of bitter tears? Would'st have it thus, my friend?
What lesson, then, were learnt at the year's end?

What shall I wish thee, then? God knoweth well
If I could have my way no shade of woe
Should ever dim thy sunshine—but I know
Strong courage is not learnt in happy sleep,
Nor patience sweet by eyes that never weep.

Ah, would my wishes were of more avail
To keep from thee the many jars of life!
Still let me wish thee courage for the strife—
The happiness that comes of work well done—
And afterwards the peace of victory won!

M. E. F.

A LUCKY MISTAKE.

"TOM," said my father to me, one cold November afternoon, as we stood in the flag-paved hall of our old-fashioned farmhouse, "you'd better put the little bay mare in the dog-cart and go into Worthington for that saddle. I clean forgot to call for it yesterday, and if you want to go out with the hounds on Saturday, you won't have another chance of getting it."

Thus my stalwart, weather-reddened, grey-haired old sire, as he put on his rough hat and took his thick walking-stick from the stand, preparatory to going about the farm. It was about three o'clock, and dinner was just over : for the time of which I speak was twenty years ago, and the farmer had not then learnt to live according to the laws of a fashion unsuited to his income and his occupation, or to ape the style and expenditure of his landlord. My father was an old-fashioned yeoman, who tilled the land which his great-grandfather had tilled before him ; and even had he lived in these days, when men of his type are rare, he would have kept to the old-fashioned ways.

I was nothing loth to act upon the parental suggestion, although it meant a long drive in the biting cold, and although the return journey would have to be done in the dark, or with very indifferent moonlight. We were utterly isolated at the Mistletoe Farm ; for we were seven miles from Worthington, our nearest town, and ten miles, in the opposite direction, from the nearest railway station. My father farmed nearly five hundred acres, some of the land—especially that lying towards Worthington—being very poor stuff and only fit for sheep. There was not even a village near ; the labourers lived in cottages scattered over the estate ; and in the depth of winter, when there was snow, or when the floods were out, we were often a week at a time and never saw a soul besides ourselves and our employés.

But we always had a good bit of horse-flesh in the stable : as, indeed, was absolutely necessary, when our only means of communication with the outer world was by road, and when the distances were so great and the roads so bad. The little bay mare that I was going to drive—Fly-by-night was the name we afterwards gave her—was a young one of our own breeding, clever as a cat and docile as a dog. From her infancy she was my playfellow ; would come to me when I whistled to her, eat out of my hand and my pocket ; and when the time came for backing her and breaking her, there was nothing to be done. She had perfect confidence and trust in us all, and especially in me ; the cat by the fireside could not be more gentle or more easy

to control. If only people would learn that a horse can, by kind treatment and constant association, be made as tame and affectionate as a household pet, there would be fewer broken bones from back jumpers and runaways.

She was a world too good for harness, I thought to myself, as I led her out of the stable and proceeded to put her to the old-fashioned, square dog-cart, which turned up behind, and looked like a mail cart—barring the colour, which was a dingy grey. The little mare was my hunter when the hounds were within reach and my father would let me go: and she carried me as gamely, even after twenty miles of harness the day before, as if she were one of the Squire's cracks and went out only once a week.

As we trotted quietly down the drive, my father put his head over the hedge and called to me.

"Maybe the saddle won't be finished," he said, his red face glowing with the cold, his eyes glancing critically at the mare. "If so, you can put up at the Angel and have your tea; but don't be later than you can help. Have you got your watch on you?"

"Yes," I said, wondering at the question.

"You'd better give it to me," said my father, stretching his arm over the hedge. "I heard yesterday, at the ordinary, there was a gentleman stopped last Monday night on the road. You haven't got too much money on you, I suppose?"

"No danger," said I, with a laugh, as I put my watch and chain into my father's big, brown hand. "They won't get much out of me if they try it on."

And off we went, turned into the high road and sped at a quick trot through the gathering twilight in the direction of Worthington.

It was dark when we reached the outskirts of the little town, and the lights, not very brilliant if tried by modern standards, sparkled cheerfully enough in the windows. Past the blacksmith's forge, with the great bellows roaring and the sparks flying from the glowing cinders; past the butcher's, with a goodly display of some of our best beef; past the grocer's, where the half-dozen children who were flattening their noses against the panes turned to look at us; and so, clattering over the uneven cobbles of the pavement, to the saddler's shop. The proprietor himself, a staid and portly person, conscious of the importance which attaches to his position in a country town, came out and nodded a greeting.

"A cold night, Mr. Tom," says he, with a shiver, as the wind took his apron. "I'm not quite ready for you. Your father didn't come in yesterday, so I thought you wouldn't want the saddle till next week."

"I want it for Saturday," said I, leaning sideways out of the trap. "The hounds are at the coppice, and the little mare and I are going. Can you do it for me if I put up?"

The saddler thought a moment.

"Ay, I can do that," he said at length. "Will you call in between eight and nine and it shall be ready for you."

I agreed, shook up the mare, and, a few yards further down, turned in through the narrow gateway of the Angel into the dim, deserted inn-yard. From a single half open doorway came a stream of light. A figure issued forth in answer to my summons.

"Good evening, Mr. Tom," said this person, approaching and patting the mare's neck.

"Hallo, Jack! is that you?" said I, as I drew the reins through my fingers and alighted, recognising, as I did so, Mr. Jack Plover, to whom was entrusted the important duty of conveying the Queen's mail-bags from Worthington to the railway town. "You'll have to wrap up warm to-night."

"Ay! bitter cold, that it is," answered Jack, undoing the traces. "But law bless me! I'm used to it. If only I'd got as good a thing between my shafts as you have here, I'd think nothing of a seventeen-mile drive, I do assure you, sir."

"Your old pony isn't to be despised, either," said I, holding up the shaft while Jack drew the mare out. "A new pair of forelegs and sound bellows would improve him, but except for that ——"

"Well, he isn't quite Newmarket or Doncaster, I do confess," said Jack, leading the mare in through the open doorway and putting her in a vacant stall. "But he's good enough for his work. I start early and we take it easy. You won't have the collar off, sir?"

"No," I said. "I am off again in an hour or so. Will you have a drink, Jack?"

We crossed the yard, passed through a swing door and found ourselves in the warm, cheerful bar, where the bright light made us wink after the darkness outside, and the huge fire sent a leaping, ruddy glare on the red curtains, and a reflection that danced merrily on the trim rows of bottles and glasses. The barmaid, buxom and fresh-coloured, smiled a welcome, and rewarded my compliments on her pink ribbons, and the roses in her cheeks by a "Go along with you," and a couple of glasses of steaming whiskey-and-water.

There was only one other occupant of the bar, a stranger to me. He was a man apparently verging on forty, buttoned up in a shabby great coat, and with his hat so slouched over his eyes that his features were hard to be discerned. To the salutation which I gave him on entering, he made no reply, but with arms folded, gazed fixedly on the floor.

"My service, sir," says Jack, raising the tumbler to his lips, and taking off the contents at a draught. "That's the stuff to keep the cold out. Although this is a bit too early. I ought to have waited until eight o'clock, just before I started."

"You can have another then, if you like," said I, with a laugh.

"Nay, sir," remonstrated Jack. "I didn't mean that. Is the clock right, miss?" he inquired of the barmaid. "Then I must be

going about my work," he added, receiving an answer in the affirmative. "Good-night, sir, and thank you kindly."

And Jack Plover, who was a sporting-looking figure with his Queen's livery and clean-shaven face, touched his hat politely and passed through the swing door.

The man with the slouched hat looked up as he left, and, addressing nobody in particular, inquired in a harsh, rough voice, with a queer burr in it:

"What time does the post go out here?"

"At eight o'clock," replied the barmaid, looking at her interrogator with no particular favour. "That is the driver of the mail-cart who has just left."

"So I judged," replied the man, rising, and putting some money on the table. "Is that right? Good-night to you."

And with a heavy, slouching gait, he strode to the door, and was gone.

After tea in the half-lit coffee-room, and a pipe in the bar, with the barmaid to tell me the gossip, I started at about half-past eight, called at the saddler's, put my saddle under the seat, and set out for home. As we passed the blacksmith's forge at the end of the street, there was a pony being shod, and Mr. Jack Plover, in a big great coat, was looking on at the process.

"Cast a shoe, Mr. Tom, and had to turn back," he called out as I passed by.

Out into the country, looking doubly black and dismal by contrast with the cheerful light and warmth that we were leaving behind; with the slanting rain driving full in one's face, so that it dazzled the sight; with grey piles of cloud hurrying overhead; with a veil of mist and darkness blending hurdle and hedge-row, field and tree into a vague, indistinct, grey mass. The road is muddy, and, albeit the high road, in bad condition; but the little mare has got her head homewards, and pulls her hardest towards warm stable and well-stocked rack and the society of heavy Dobbin and his brethren. Not that my little hunter is to be permitted to pull herself to pieces through ruts and over ill-laid stones, for there is Saturday in prospect, and, with the country in this state, we shall want the very last ounce. Now we are climbing a hill, and, anon, we are on the top, and the rain and the wind beat savagely upon us and the prospect on either hand is dreary enough. Now steadily down the shedding ground, with a tight rein and a careful look out for loose stones; for this is a deep descent, and one false step may take twenty pounds off the little mare's value. The banks are high, at all events, so there is some shelter, and down at the bottom there are trees on either hand.

It was pitch dark in this hollow, but I let the mare out at the bottom of the hill and gave her her head. Suddenly, with a loud snort, she swerved violently, ran the wheel of the trap on to a heap

of wayside stones, put there to mend the road ; and in a second we were over.

I went out, of course, and the driving-box, the saddle, and a *débris* of miscellaneous articles after me. I landed partly on my shoulder, partly on my head, and was up again in a moment, although a bit dazed. The moment I gained my feet, I was seized by the collar, and a harsh voice exclaimed—not to me, but to someone else :

“ Hold his head down—hold his head down ! ”

A dusky form sprang to the mare’s head and kept her from attempting to rise. A third form knelt on the trap.

“ By jove ! ” exclaimed this last fellow in an angry tone, “ we’ve got the wrong man ! ”

“ What ? ” said he who had hold of my collar. “ Do you mean to say it isn’t the —— ? ”

With a volley of oaths the other replied in the negative. The man who had hold of me released me and joined the other. They whispered together for a few seconds. Then the first one came back to me and said, with a fine pretence of indifference :

“ Nasty accident, sir ! But it might have been worse. It’s lucky we were at hand to help you. ”

“ I don’t know about that, ” I replied, with no small acrimony, “ for my horse shied at one of you. She never did it in her life before. You’ll oblige me by helping to get her out. ”

In a twinkling we had the harness undone, and the mare, with a flounder and a stagger, was on her feet and shook herself in a disgusted fashion. The men said nothing, but obeyed my directions. Luckily, nothing was broken ; the mare had rubbed a little hair off her, as well as I could tell, but her knees were all right. In seven or eight minutes from the time we went over, so quickly did it all happen, I was in my seat again, ready to start.

My assailants, or assistants, whichever they were, made no opposition, and seemed only anxious to get rid of me ; they despatched me without a word, and I was a mile on my road before I fully realised what had happened. As is always the case in an accident, I could only recall what took place immediately before and immediately after, and for that very reason the words uttered by the men were more vividly impressed on my memory. What did they mean ?

It flashed into my mind like a revelation. They had been misled by the shape of my trap ; which, as I have said, was square behind, and looked like a mail-cart, while the darkness was too great in their place of ambuscade for them to see the colour. The time of my arrival was about that of the mail, had not Jack Plover been obliged to turn back ; and the careful pace at which I had come down the hill accorded very well with the steady movements of Jack’s nag.

And the voice? I had heard it somewhere lately—the man in the Angel bar, who asked, too, the time when the mail left. There was no doubt of the men's purpose.

How to prevent it? How to warn Jack in time? There was no road back but the one by which I had come, unless I made a detour of several miles. Neither was there a house near whence to get assistance. I pulled up and thought it out. A bruise on my right arm suggested something. I had fallen on my left side and this bruise was caused by the saddle tumbling after me. I made up my mind at once.

Turning in through the first gate I came to, I drove over the turf to a corner of the field where was a group of trees. Here I took the mare out; put the trap under the elms and turned the cushions; took off all the harness but the bridle, and saddled her. Luckily the bridle had no blinkers. I wound the long reigns round and round my arm, mounted, and thanking Providence for my knowledge of the country, rode at the nearest fence. There was a faint moonlight to help us, but it was terribly dark. My heart was in my mouth as we went at the fence, which was a big upstanding one, but I knew there was no ditch on the taking-off side, and I gave the little mare the word at the right moment. She jumped clean from under me and landed me on the crupper. I never shall forget that leap! If there had been anyone to see it I could have sold her almost for her weight in gold.

We were half way across the next field before I had regained my seat properly, and then the mad exhilaration of the thing took possession of both of us. There was a flight of hurdles next which we took in our stride. Then a bank and a close-cropped hedge that stood up, black as Erebus, against the grey of the night; which we jumped as though it were twice its height. Then a flock of frightened sheep went scurrying away into the darkness.

It was all turf, and, for the first time, I blessed the poverty of the land, that made it worthless to plough. A dozen fences negotiated in the same mad fashion brought us into a field that skirted the high road; and here we were pounded. There was a big bull-finch into the road, with a deep drop. To go on, parallel with the road, was impossible, for there was a made-up bank with a cropped hedge, full of stakes, and a deep drain, as I knew, ran on either side. I rode up and down by the bull-finch in despair. Was all my trouble to be in vain?

At last I made up my mind, and rode, not too fast, at the great, towering, straggling hedge. I put my arm across my face, shut my eyes, into it we went, and out of it, with a scramble and a flounder, we came—separately. The bull-finch brushed me nearly out of the saddle, and the mare and I dropped side by side into the road, but both of us on our legs. Before I had time to remount I heard the sound of approaching wheels, and a man whistling merrily.

"Pull up, Jack!" I called out.

Jack's whistle ceased, and a more astonished countenance I never beheld than the one which looked down from the mail cart.

"What the dickens ——?" he began.

Then I explained.

"Well," he said, at the end of it, without a word of commendation for me. "That *is* a good pony of yours. What shall we do?"

"I'll tell you," I said, for my blood was up with the excitement of the night. "Drive back to Worthington, get Rogers, the constable, and a pistol apiece, and let them try again."

"Done with you," said Jack, turning round. "You ride on ahead and find Rogers, and I'll wait for you by the old toll-bar."

In half an hour the constable and I were seated, very uncomfortably, on the back of the mail-cart and driving along as fast as Jack's pony could be induced to go. Our only fear was lest the fellows should have got tired of waiting, for it was quite an hour and a half later than the time when the mail should have passed them. Down the hill we went, our hearts thumping away with excitement, not to mention the difficulty of holding on, and Jack performing "My Pretty Jane" with exquisite variations.

Well, to cut my story short, we got one of them. The constable, in his eagerness, jumped down directly the first man had seized the horse's head, and the other two fellows made off. We got the right gentleman, though; the identical fellow who had been in the Angel bar and whose voice I had recognised. He was tried at the Assizes and, two other convictions being proved against him, was sentenced to seven years' penal servitude.

I went out with the hounds on Saturday, and my little mare was the heroine of the hour. The Squire himself came up to me, and after complimenting us both on our achievement, said:

"What do you call her?"

"Well, Squire," I replied, "we haven't given her a name yet."

"Call her Little Fly-by-night," said he.

And that's how she got her name.



THE CRUISE OF THE RESERVE SQUADRON.

BY CHARLES W. WOOD,

AUTHOR OF "THROUGH HOLLAND," "IN THE BLACK FOREST," ETC.

IT chanced that the day after the Fleet reached Gibraltar was the anniversary of the Queen's Coronation. It was on that day we had mounted to the signal tower, and Broadley had come down dilapidated in mind and body. I had applied restoratives in the hotel, and seized upon a sedan chair that hadn't seen daylight for at least half a century, and we had made a triumphal progress through Waterport Street accompanied by a train of admirers some five miles long, more or less.

Before "doing" the galleries, and whilst we were yet strolling about the town, suddenly, as the clock struck twelve, the guns boomed forth from the seven vessels, and fired a salute. The ships, in honour of the day, had dressed at 8 a.m., rainbow fashion, just as they had dressed at Arosa Bay. The forts took up the tale. Everywhere guns seemed to be thundering forth their artillery, shaking the town to its centre, almost shaking the rock itself. The white smoke curled upwards in all directions. Every church in the town clashed forth its bells, mingling their sounds, not in a harmonious peal certainly, but in a right hearty one; as if they felt the occasion called for great rejoicing, commemorating the day when our beloved Queen Victoria publicly took upon herself the cares and responsibilities of a great nation and entered upon her long and prosperous reign.

The air seemed alive with sound; the town buzzed with excitement; the vessels of the Squadron looked gay and lively out upon the waters. It was a passing but brilliant effect, and when all was over, and the bells' last vibrations had died away, and the faintest vestige of smoke had dissolved and disappeared, the ensuing silence was almost startling. But it was a happy circumstance that thus recorded the presence of the Reserve Squadron at Gibraltar. The thunders of that salute of twenty-one guns innumeraably multiplied, and the wild clashings of the bells, would long dwell in the memory of the people.

Journeying towards Gibraltar, some of us had now and then talked of the possibility of visiting Granada and the Alhambra. We were to be stationary nine days, and in that period much might be accomplished in the way of adventure and sightseeing. To reach the Alhambra in the short time at our command would no doubt be an undertaking, yet needing only courage and energy to make it possible. Again and again we returned to the subject, as a moth

hovers round a candle, painting the attractions of the Alhambra in all their gorgeous fascination, and firing our imaginations with tales and marvels that rivalled any of the Arabian Nights' entertainments. Captain and Mr Edward Jago were both anxious to make the excursion, if it could be done. That remained to be proved.

On reaching Gibraltar and making inquiries, it seemed that the idea must be given up. The steamer leaving for Malaga on Friday returned only on the following Thursday night. This would be running too great a risk, for the Fleet sailed again on the Friday morning. Any slight chance detaining the boat but a few hours (a by no means impossible occurrence) would throw everything out of gear. The *Defence* could not sail without her captain, and the much wished for excursion was reluctantly abandoned.

We who had wished to visit these halls, legends and traditions of the past were disappointed. Suddenly it began to be whispered that another boat, belonging to a French company, would leave Malaga on the Monday night and reach Gibraltar on the Tuesday morning. If this rumour proved correct, it would exactly meet our necessities.

"Away with you at once," said Broadley to me, on the Thursday morning, after breakfast. (He had begun to recover from the effects of yesterday's Jacob's Ladder.) "I can't land just now, but go you," he continued, in lordly and commanding tones; "learn all you can; and don't attempt to return on board until you are fully primed in your subject.—And good luck attend you!"

Away I went, under orders, determined to leave no stone unturned that would give our hopes and projects the ghost of a chance. The task was harder than I had bargained for. It was difficult to get at the right office and the right people, simply because the boat did not belong to Gibraltar, and merely called there in passing. I was referred from pillar to post, from Peter to Paul, in a way that would have worn out any ordinary amount of energy and patience. Some said there was a boat, some said there was not a boat. One affirmed that even if there were a boat, it would be impossible to visit the Alhambra in the given time; another declared that supposing it could be managed, we should all be dead with fatigue before we got back again. Perhaps it was well that statements were divided; had everyone kept to the same tale, discouragement would have been a very quick result.

Finally, after visiting a dozen offices and spending three hours in the task, it appeared beyond dispute that we could leave Gibraltar on the Friday morning at six; that a French steamer would call at Malaga on the Monday night and reach Gibraltar on the Tuesday morning.

Armed with this satisfactory information, I returned on board and changed the aspect of affairs. Captain Jago and his brother at once decided to make the attempt; Broadley and I followed so good a lead; and Captain Cator of the *Lord Warden* completed our party.

At five o'clock on Friday morning, the Captain's galley was manned and four of us put off for the little Spanish steamer bound for Malaga, and lying some way up the bay. Gibraltar, with its houses at the foot of the rock, and up the slopes, and overhanging the water, seemed yet in repose. The great rock rose, a ponderous mass, its outlines clear-cut against the flushed, early morning sky, and looking not unlike a lion couchant. We were in a southern



GIBRALTAR.

climate and need not dread the fickle changes of the north. Steady, cloudless blue skies, floods of sunshine by day, balmy, almost tropical nights—this would be our portion. Everything was in our favour. The very vapour that clung round the centre of the rock seemed slowly ascending and dispersing—a sure token of fair weather. It was an incense-breathing morn, to be enjoyed to the full. There was little shipping in the bay, and, turning the angle of the higher part of the rock, forming the lion's head, we spied our small craft getting up steam.

Soon we were in need of "incense" indeed, or something equally powerful and purifying. Are you acquainted, reader, with the odours of these little coasting Spanish boats? If not, 'twere idle to attempt to describe the indescribable. They are a concentration of all that is unpleasant, and we devoutly hoped the French steamer of Monday would prove an advance upon this. Yet might we have been worse off. The rest of the passengers—for the most part country people, almost peasants, travelling with baskets and bundles—allowed us quiet possession of the bridge, where we found ourselves unmolested, and as far removed as possible from a very complication of odours.

Captain Cator was seen approaching in his galley. Then followed two gentlemen from other vessels, who intended going on from the Alhambra to Seville, and rejoining the Squadron at Vigo. This brought up our number to the mystic seven. Just before starting, a courier came on board and offered his services, and we were glad to engage him. He proved an excellent guide: all trouble was taken off our hands, everything was well organised, and nothing in the end was left undone. Apart from the additional comfort to ourselves, the fact of having a courier so well up to his work, made, considering the limited amount of time at our command, every difference to our enjoyment and to what we were able to see in our travels.

Six o'clock, and away started the steamer, with its complement of passengers and smells. After our late quarters, we felt we had put to sea in a cockleshell that would scarcely have weathered a Mediterranean gale. But the waters were so calm, so blue, so placid, it was impossible to realise that they are ever disturbed by tempests. Surely they must for ever be thus mild and gentle, breaking upon their shores in quiet ripples that know little of ebb and flow.

We steamed down the whole length of the Rock, passing the Squadron. Perhaps we felt a slight inward glow and access of virtue as we reflected that out of that large company we only—a mere handful—had been found sufficiently enterprising to visit the Alhambra and thus make the most and the best of our spare time.

Rounding Europa Point, we came in front view of that mass of perpendicular rock, which looks appalling, and where the sailor boy had found his death. After this we got into the broad, blue waters of the Levant. The shores about here were low and flat, and not very interesting; nor did we steer very close to them. The sun steadily held on his course, the day grew hotter and more brilliant, the sea more liquid and sparkling. On the bridge, a space some eight feet square fitted up with benches, we were not so badly off, after all. It was clean, and, so far, a contrast to the deck of the little boat, which seemed to depend upon the clouds or a heavy sea for a wash down. Once in motion, too, the smells were less overpowering, the immediate region of the engine room less evident.

About ten o'clock we began to think that a second breakfast might reasonably follow the hasty and partial meal of 5 a.m., and Wiley,

our courier, went below to spy out the land and reconnoitre. Presently he returned to report progress. It was a good land, flowing with abundance; before eleven we should fare sumptuously. Oh, that delicious anticipation, the appetite every moment growing keener, to do justice to the savoury viands and baked meats! And oh, the reality, when, face to face with our hopes, they proved delusive as a *château en Espagne*. Not one of us, I am persuaded, has forgotten it to this day.

About eleven o'clock, seven hungry travellers might have been seen wending their contented way from the bridge to the little cabin in which the repast was spread: and before twelve seven hungry travellers might have been seen wending their slow and sad way back to the bridge, not more cheerful of countenance, in spite of all the *oil* that had passed before them.

We took our seats at the table, and certainly courses enough were supplied. We had to pass nearly all. Some were mysterious; messes undoubtedly; whether savoury, was less apparent. Others were dressed with oil that seemed to come straight from the engine-room, and the very odour was enough to last one for a week. One or two of us were glad to make out with bread and coffee, yet even the bread was sour and the coffee bitter: but they were free from oil, and that was saying a great deal. I think we were all glad to get back to the bridge and the pure air.

The coast was growing more interesting. Mountains rose in great piles, green and fertile, or barren and snow-tipped. Stretches of white coast were relieved by smiling valleys, and rugged passes; slopes on which we could discern orange groves, and olive yards; trace the long rows of sage-green trees whose fruit adds so much to the wealth and industry of Spain. Here and there a little ship-building gave life to the otherwise dead and deserted shores: small dockyards, so out of the world it was a wonder how they had come into existence. Factories we passed occasionally; tall chimneys that stood out in contrast with the valleys behind them. Villages, few and far between, nestled under the hills, dwelling in sight and sound of the eternal swish-swash of the waters.

Few stoppages hindered our progress: apparently, few stations or villages needed interchange with the outer world. We halted about one o'clock, at a small settlement given up to mining. Here landed a solitary passenger: a tall, fair, gentlemanly man, who looked more English than Spanish, with a weighty bag of money he had brought from Gibraltar. He guarded his treasure well, until it was safe in the hands of those who met him on the landing stage. It was destined to pay the men employed in the works, and once every week the journey to Gibraltar had to be undertaken for the supplies. Very bearable to-day; but in a rough sea, what an ordeal!

All down the coast, at intervals, we passed round towers, built, I believe, in ancient times by the Moors, for purposes of defence. So

the afternoon wore on until, towards five o'clock, a range of hills opened up in a grand amphitheatre, and Malaga, in a long line of houses, factories and settlements straggling far over the immense plain—the cathedral conspicuous in the centre of the town—announced the end of our present journey.

Malaga is favoured in many ways. Its plains are beautiful and fertile, abounding in plantations of the sugar-cane, which grows only in climates unknown to frost. Vineyards, olive yards, orangeries enrich the surrounding neighbourhood. The climate is unusually dry, and so far is better suited to some phases of consumption than Madeira, which is damp and relaxing. Rain falls, on an average,



THE SQUARE, GIBRALTAR.

about thirty-nine days in the year; and when it does fall, seldom lasts beyond a few hours. Clear skies day after day, and a constant flood of sunshine, are its chief features, and who could wish for anything beyond? Imagine this in England. What a paradise it would make of our little island, which, after all, contains beauties that touch the heart so closely, and perhaps, in their way, are unrivalled by the rest of this fair world.

Malaga sleeps in a warm plain, sheltered from the north and east by a grand chain of hills, that form so splendid a background to the town. One may follow the undulations in long-drawn lines, sloping downwards to the west until they are lost to sight. The hill behind the town and overlooking the sea, is a massive, fort-crowned rock, interspersed with patches of green and a few trees, that, to-day, had all turned to brown, were dried up and withered.

Not far from this hill, and opposite the custom-house, we came to an anchor. It would be necessary to land in small boats. No sooner at anchor than we were surrounded by a crowd of men, hustling, quarrelling, almost knocking each other down in their eagerness for employment. They swarmed on board until there was no longer standing room. The row and the smells were intolerable. If we all live to be a hundred, not one of us will forget that landing—our *mauvais quart d'heure* of the whole trip. It was half an hour before our traps could be got together, ourselves assembled, and the whole congregated in a boat for the shore. At the last moment, Captain Jago could not be discovered; but at length he was espied at the



BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF MALAGA.

further end of the vessel, standing upon a locker, keeping as far as possible out of the way of the smells and the boatmen; waiting in patience until we came to his rescue.

At last we moved off for the shore, full of thanksgiving at being free from the unwashed multitude. Would Malaga itself prove more acceptable?

We landed at the Custom House steps, gave up our keys to the courier, who, having nothing to declare, soon got through the form of visitation. Once free of the port, we found Malaga not only bearable but pleasant. The hotel was near at hand: a large building with a court, where people sat and drank Spanish wines and coffee, eat ices, read the newspapers, lounged and gossiped away the hours. A balcony looking into the court ran round each floor, up to the top of the house. Table d'hôte was at six o'clock, and we who had

fasted all day, felt that the good things of dinner could not come too soon. If we waited to dine in private until a later hour, we might fare worse.

On the way from Gibraltar we had decided that rather than stay the night in Malaga it would be better to charter a special train that evening on to Granada. We should thus save time, travel in the cool of the night instead of the heat of the day, and have an extra day at the Alhambra; the latter consideration most weighty of all. There was just time to make the inquiry before dinner; one of the hotel carriages was at the door, and two or three of us, piloted by the courier, started for the railway station. There we found that a special train was possible, but it would be neither fast nor satisfactory, on account of traffic in front that could not be shunted: and the charge would be £100. The sum, far beyond any reasonable anticipations, seemed extortionate; *le jeu ne valait pas la chandelle*; the officials were evidently not often asked for a special train, and seemed to throw as much cold water as possible upon the project: their very manner suggested that danger might lurk in any derangement of their ordinary routine: and we gave up the idea.

But there was consolation. We should dine in peace and see Malaga in the evening, rest quietly in our beds through the night, and start in the morning refreshed and invigorated, by the express (save the mark!) for Granada. So we returned, reported progress, and proceeded to make ourselves comfortable and contented. Our various quarters in the hotel were apportioned to us, but on demanding a bath for the morning, we created a sort of panic. It was quite ludicrous. The Spaniards evidently are not a "tubbing" race.

"You would never believe," said Wiley, our guide, courier, and general factotum, the next morning, "the trouble I had about those baths. I thought I should never get them at all. The hotel people had hardly ever heard such a request, and to provide them ran east and west through the town."

And, after all, they were forthcoming only in the shape of large, wooden, washerwomen's tubs; but they held water, and the supply was not limited, and, all things considered, we fared better than we had expected.

Our quarters were no sooner settled, than the bell rang for table d'hôte. Broadley and I, parched with heat and thirst, overcome with late odours, fainting for want of a decent meal within the last twenty-four hours, were seized with what the French would call *une envie for shandy-gaff*, overwhelming and not to be controlled. A voice within seemed to cry aloud that nothing but shandy-gaff would restore our equilibrium. The ordinary Spanish wines—such as are placed before the guests at tables d'hôte in Spain, and included in the charge for dinner—were utterly unable to meet our necessities. We turned from them as a capricious invalid turns from the dainties prepared to tempt him. The rest of our party went in for wines

refined and *recherchés*, scanning the list as connoisseurs, and weighing bouquet and strength versus climate and country. After murmuring such syllables as Dry Monopole, and Laffitte, they put down the list and turned upon us a supercilious gaze. We were mere Goths and Vandals, beyond the pale of refined humanity. Even Captain Jago, with all his kindness and large heart, looked at us with a sort of Well-I-am-disappointed-in-you expression. An agonizing shudder went round at the bare mention of the word shandy-gaff. And it cannot be denied that there is something gross and plebeian, not to say rather low-lived, in the very sound. Nevertheless, how refreshing the beverage—on exceptional occasions.

We gave our description to the head waiter (he had never heard of the concoction: and what with that, and the order for cold baths in the morning, they began to suspect us of more than mere eccentricity) with a minuteness that proved our capacity for entering into details—a rare virtue—and waited for the result. Dinner commenced, and we cast impatient glances for our tankards. Captain Jago, who faced us—with a merry twinkle in his eye, that, indeed, was seldom absent from it—quaffed his light and sparkling wine to our health and reformation, and evidently felt that we had the worst of it. In a few minutes, before the soup had well-nigh gone round, the doors at the end of the room were thrown open, and the head waiter staggered in, bearing aloft a large tureen, full to the brim of what looked like eggs beaten up to a white froth. We consulted the menu—found fish was due—and this could not be fish. He came down the room with slow and stately step, and with as much ceremony as ever heralded the boar in ancient days, and to our intense surprise, triumphantly placed his burden between Broadley and me.

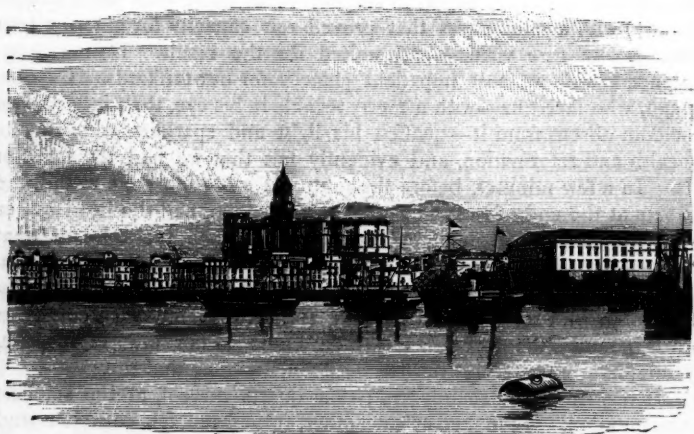
It was truly our shandy-gaff; four quarts thereof, at the smallest computation. We looked at each other, turned red, felt conscious and guilty, and very greedy; then joined in the laugh that went round. A large ladle had been provided by the thoughtful waiter—and the more we ladled, the more inexhaustible seemed the supply. Finally, it looked so sparkling and bright, so frothy and refreshing, that they who had gone in for wines of price and vintage almost began to feel as if we had turned the tables upon them. They were too proud to admit this, but they all looked it. Silence is golden, but does not always answer its purpose.

The dinner was a very fair one, and if a few mysterious looking dishes were discreetly passed, many remained in which lurked neither mystery nor any evil. The company at table, not very large or especially select, seemed composed of various nations, who “comported” themselves according to the manner of foreigners, and disposed of their food and their knives and forks in a way that Broadley and I thought far more agonising to refined nerves than our innocent shandy-gaff.

Dinner ended, we went out to reconnoitre, and turned into the

Alameda, a broad, handsome thoroughfare planted with trees, beneath which benches were placed at intervals. Here we sat for a time, contemplating human nature in its lighter aspect. The great heat of the day was past, but it was still warmer than was quite agreeable. The declining sun cast long shadows athwart the wide thoroughfare, crowded with Spaniards, men, women and children, enjoying what to them was the cool evening air. Nearly all the women carried fans, ladies and dependants alike. Thus it happens that fans are an institution in Spain; as much a necessity, an article of attire, as a gown or a handkerchief; and for this reason they form an important article of commerce.

The Alameda was not only alive with people, but the air buzzed



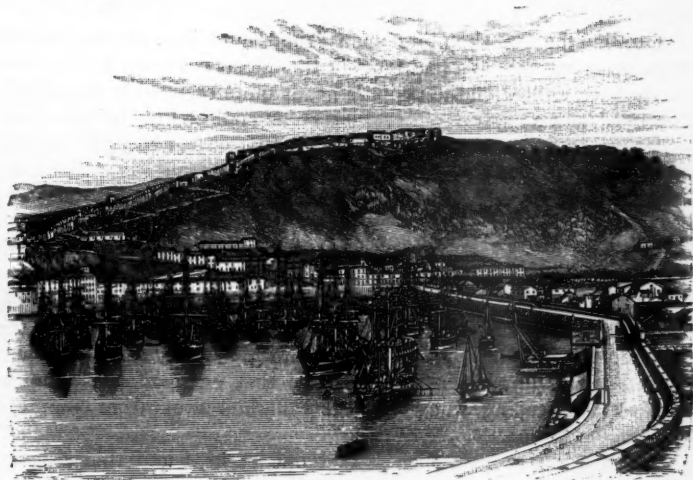
MALAGA.

with voices; women gossiping with each other, coquetting with the men—as only Spanish women know how to do; every now and then pausing to pick up or reprove a child—by far the least attractive element of the human race in Spain. Both men and women are singularly attractive; the women, graceful, languishing, captivating. With their dark, flashing eyes, and the contour of a lovely face delicately shaded and half concealed by the mantilla that only a Spanish woman knows how to wear, they are made twice beautiful.

It has been said that the Spanish women are formed for love; most certainly they are for admiration; and few, as certainly, come within the influence and intimacy of their daily life, the charm of their manner, the grace of their gestures, the unstudied voluptuousness of their attitudes, without paying the tribute at least of a wounded heart or a passing sigh. Spanish women, on their side, pay Englishmen the compliment of admiring them before all other races.

The Spanish men are many of them small ; but so compact, so well proportioned and finely knit, so manly-looking in spite of their size, with their rich, warm colour, dark eyes and determined expression, that you forget all about their inches and find room only for praise. They have hands and feet anyone might envy, and on horseback look as if they had been born and bred in the saddle. Take them for all in all, the Spaniards, men and women, seem to me the handsomest race in the world.

Leaving the seniors of our party, who did not care for too much exercise after dinner, to this contemplation of human nature under the shade of the trees, Mr. Jago, Broadley and I, escorted by our invaluable guide, turned our steps and attention to the busy streets of



THE PORT, MALAGA.

the town. These were quite as crowded as the Alameda. Surely the whole population was abroad. The shops by this time were brilliantly lighted, darkness was falling rapidly—twilight lingers not here. The place might have been a small Paris, yet not so very small either. Jewellers displayed their flashing gems, haberdashers their glistening silks ; perhaps the fan shops were not the least attractive. We entered one and watched two girls making a purchase. They were of the humbler class, yet they, too, displayed much of the abounding grace of their country. A small black shawl was thrown over their shoulders, with an air and a manner that in England is seen only in a gentlewoman. They were deliberate in their choice, and finally found a magnificent combination of gold and tinsel irresistible. These they appropriated, and proceeded to flirt open and use with a finished gesture that was quite startling.

Here we, also, made some purchases, but they had not the interest of our fans at Santiago : guiltless alike of the voluptuousness of Pyramid's and the refined and pastoral subjects that distinguished Oxford's and mine ; which had so raised, as the reader will remember, the admiration and approval of the ward-room. These from Malaga were mere groups of flowers, moonlight scenes and so forth ; pretty, but not startling ; and we bought them, I believe, more because they were so absurdly cheap than for any other special reason.

The streets were many of them narrow and straggling, the houses tall. After our late experiences of Carril and Gibraltar, Malaga looked large and imposing. In situation—bounded on the one side by that grand amphitheatre of hills, on the other by the blue waters of the Mediterranean, which flow up to its very doors—it is highly favoured.

Quitting the fan shop, we soon found ourselves on one of the principal squares. We had thought the streets crowded, but here we might have walked on the people's heads quite easily. It was simply thronged, and a gayer, more exciting scene could hardly be witnessed. The town might have been in revolt, a prey to flames, undergoing a siege—anything, in short, demanding strong measures and vast gatherings ; and yet they were simply enjoying themselves. That, and nothing more. All down the pavement, rows deep, men and women were seated at small tables, drinking, laughing, noisy, overflowing with fun and merriment. The hot night, and the clear, dark blue sky overhead, in which the stars flashed with southern lustre, allowed them to be bareheaded at will and lightly clad. The centre of the square as well as the sides, surged with the multitude, and many were idly lounging against the railings that enclosed a monument shaded by weeping willows. Lights flashed around in countless, dazzling profusion.

"Surely it is a gala night," said one of us, "and this a grand illumination?"

"Not at all, sir," replied our guide. "It is an ordinary, everyday scene. If it were anything special, you would find a great deal more going on. The Spaniards are wonderful people for enjoying themselves."

This appeared evident. And it was easy to understand that a nation who put so much energy and fire into their simple recreations, would, when roused to riot and revolution, become almost insane and irresponsible for their actions.

One large house was resplendent with lights and gilding and the sounds of music. It was the chief café of Malaga, a gorgeous, imposing building ; and we entered. Delicious ices they gave us. They *have* delicious ices in Spain, and serve them in tumblers, not wine-glasses—and how grateful are they in that climate ! But what enchanted us most as we sat and looked and took it all in—the wonderful, moving crowd, the buzz of excitement, the energy of

young Spanish blood, the extraordinary feeling of life and health, youth and spirits, even in those no longer young—were the strains of music to which we listened.

Five musicians seated under the bend of the staircase were playing—four of them the guitar and one the harp—in a strangely beautiful and telling manner. The effect they produced, the tones they drew out of the instruments, the exquisitely-marked time, filled us with amazement. We had never heard anything like it; I dare say we never shall again. At the Alhambra we listened to the king of the gipsies, who is also supposed to be a king amongst guitar players; we heard other famous players in Spain; but none that came up to this little group, sitting quietly apart in that Malaga café.

"Marvellous!" cried Broadley at last, who is not at all given to adjectives as a rule. "How on earth do they do it? Where does so much sound come from?"

Presently we went up for a closer inspection, and, with dismay, found that they were blind. A sadder group, a more intent, pathetic expression than sat on the five faces, I never wish to see. Yet, no doubt, there was the secret of their success. Unable to take part in anything going on around, the attention undivided, the whole life devoted to the one object—they had concentrated all their powers upon music; and we had the result.

Yet it was almost too pitiful a sight, and we were glad to turn away, walk through the rooms above, and join the moving crowd. In one room gambling was in full form, and we watched the glances of those seated round the table, as pile after pile found its way to the croupier's heap: watched the expressive Spanish faces, the gleaming eyes, the fingers that clutched their winnings, the sighs, and sometimes the anger, with which one saw his silver or gold swept from him. We looked—and virtuously resisted the temptation. For is it not a temptation? The love of chance; the excitement of the mere game; the uncertainty attending it; the possibility of doubling and trebling the contents of your money-bag in so easy, so pleasant a manner. "There is a tide in the affairs of men—" and who has not said to himself: "Here, maybe, my tide has set in—I will risk my fate." And so risking, how few have not found that the tide was at the ebb instead of the flow, and has left them high and dry on the shores of repentance?

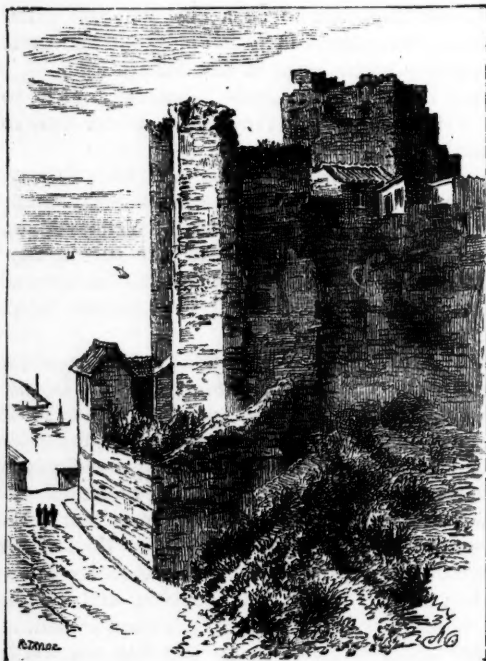
We neither played nor repented; but watched the tide awhile, gave a little more time and attention to the musicians, and went out again into the night.

Piloted by our courier, we visited one or two of the *cafés chantants* of Malaga, as they may be called by courtesy, for anything less like singing never was heard. We went out of curiosity, and were satisfied once and for ever with the pitiful sights and sounds. On a raised platform, six or eight women, coarse, bold and painted, sat in a semi-circle. A man in the centre extemporised, as they termed it,

surrounded by these satellites, whose part seemed to be to applaud him with stampings, castanets, and loud shoutings, whenever his inspiration failed him, brought him to a full stop, and caused a gap in the performance. The man's part was the worst of all. His face was impossibly disagreeable, hardly human. He sat and howled, dwelling upon one note until the veins swelled in his neck, and he grew almost black in the face, and his eyes started, and one wondered why he did not fall to the ground in a fit. Then he would utter

a few unintelligible words, and howl again, sustaining the one note until it came out in waves of sound horribly painful to listen to. The place itself might have been the worst and most immoral in the world, but there was no outward token of it either in performers or audience; but the spectacle was so degrading that we were soon glad to escape into a purer atmosphere.

These institutions seem peculiar to Spain. They possess neither music, wit, nor beauty. The *cafés chantants* of France



OLD MOORISH CASTLE, MALAGA.

and Germany may be bad enough, and are often coarse, voluptuous exhibitions in which ill-motives and low lives are only too conspicuous; but at least they possess some sense and music; are intelligible, if nothing else: perhaps only too much so. These popular performances in Spain are worthy only of idiots; and a greater idiot, to all appearance, than the hero of that night, never was seen.

We felt that gambling was better than this; those blind musicians were elevated into more than mortals by comparison; the town (now that the shops were closed, and the lights were out, and the crowds had dispersed and left the streets to the quiet of the night and the benediction of the stars) reflected the purity of the silent skies over-

head. Many of these streets were narrow, dark and tortuous; and now and then—an ordinary experience in Continental towns—we had to rush through with aromatic handkerchiefs held to our noses; but all this was bearable—almost agreeable, in comparison with the exhibitions which had lately done violence to our feelings.

We had a long day's work before us on the morrow, if not a hard one; it would probably be both; and we thought it would be wise to turn in before the small hours of the night had chimed. So we wended our way through the deserted streets to the hotel. There we found the rest of our party had sensibly retired; the house was in slumber steeped—or at least in peace. We too sought our dormitories; full of the morrow's anticipations, full of hope, energy and spirit at the thought of what lay before us in the next few days: the Plains of Granada, the majesty of the snow-capped Sierra Nevada; the glories of the world-famed, legendary halls of the Alhambra.

Before finally turning in, Broadley and I went out upon our balconies for a few moments' enjoyment of the night. The air was soft and languid; the stars in the dark sky were dazzling; the town was given over to silence and repose. Across the Alameda and beyond the opposite houses, the Mediterranean plashed lazily against the stone walls; we could hear the murmur, though we saw nothing of the water and the harbour shipping resting upon its bosom. The night seemed too fair to forsake, as, with a certain sacrifice to duty, we closed our shutters and sought oblivion—that blessed unconsciousness that for the time being ends all our joys and sorrows.

The next morning proved all that could be wished, including any amount of heat, and a flood of gilding, laughing sunshine. We were up betimes, ready to conquer the world. An early breakfast was despatched and the bill settled with the assistance of our admirable courier, though not without a laugh at its heading. Yesterday, on arriving, each, according to custom, had entered his name, designation, nationality, &c., in the book provided for that purpose by the exigencies of the law of the country. Captain Jago of the *Defence*, Captain Cator of the *Lord Warden*, and so on. This morning behold our party ennobled. The bill was thus headed: "My Lord Warden, Charles Wood, Esquire, and Party!" Why they should have pitched upon so retiring and humble-minded an individual for their second name, has remained a mystery to that individual to this day. With some fun and laughter, the bill was receipted, and I obtained possession of the document as a curiosity. We departed in the full flow of health and enjoyment (Mr. Edward Jago alone possessed the life and spirits of a hundred men, an inexhaustible amount of fun and humour) and were ready to appreciate to their very utmost all the beauties of nature and of art that might be before us.

MRS. CARR'S COMPANION.

CHAPTER IV.

WOMAN'S WORK.

LADY MARY EGERTON had asked Miss Keith to replace Miss Bythesea at her dinner-table, and, with feelings of misgiving, Viola complied with the request.

It was at this entertainment that she first made acquaintance with the Reverend Eustace Vaughan, a young curate, afterwards destined to play a not unimportant part in the history of her life at St. Brenda's.

He fell to her share at dinner, and rejoiced in his good luck in securing so particularly pleasant a companion, in place of the elderly widow to whom his fears had pointed. But presently, during the procession in parti-coloured splendour of the jellies and creams, his interesting neighbour's attention became suddenly distracted, the expression of her lovely features changed, and one of the very best stories of his collection, a relic of old college days, fell upon unheeding ears. She was listening to some talk that was passing at the other end of the table.

"Ah, yes!" someone was saying; "it might have gone hard with Romaine, if he had not cut the Gordian knot of his difficulties by taking himself out of the way of them."

"I don't know that," put in Colonel Kane, suddenly, picking up the thread of the conversation, and so making it general. "I have always understood that his greatest vice was weakness, and nothing worse. Whatever his faults may have been, he expiated them pretty dearly, poor fellow. 'De Mortuis,' you know!"

Glancing suddenly across the table at the end of his speech, he found his *vis-à-vis* Miss Keith's eyes fixed upon him with an indefinable expression of interest—nay, almost gratitude—which surprised him. But encountering his look of astonishment, she dropped them quickly, and took up her fork in some confusion, while he continued to address his nephew.

"By-the-bye, Wilfred, I think you once knew something of these Romaines, did you not?"

"They were very kind to me when I was quartered near Fairhurst, their country place, two years ago," Captain Kane answered briefly.

"And Miss Romaine—you knew her, of course?—what is she like?" asked Olive.

"One of the most altogether charming and beautiful women I ever

met, present company only excepted," he replied, with a comprehensive bow to the ladies, at which Rose smiled, while Viola opposite blushed uncomfortably.

"Ah!" said Colonel Kane, "my friend Somerville spoke very highly of Miss Romaine. An only child, was she not? Her father, it appears, had taken good care of her, perhaps with a view to some such contingency; but when the crash came she insisted on giving up everything, even her beautiful jewels, and the personal belongings that were hers by right. The creditors would have made her an allowance, but, I hear, she would accept nothing."

"She is actually penniless, then!" said Lady Mary, touched, perhaps, by some shade of compunction.

"Except for her mother's little fortune; enough, she declared, to keep her from want. Somerville said she showed great sense and spirit, and deserved a better fate."

Olive was listening with eagerness, and would fain have heard further; but the conversation drifted away to topics of more general interest, and she learned no more of the girl who had once aspired to become her brother's wife.

Aggrieved by Viola's absent looks and tones, Mr. Vaughan made no further effort to progress in her good graces; and hoping, perhaps, to pique her by neglect, in the drawing-room turned his attentions where he knew they would be better received. Captain Kane dropped into a vacant place near Viola, and began talking low and earnestly. They were sitting in the recess of the window, half-hidden by the heavy velvet curtains. The easy confidence and familiarity of his manner distressed his companion; she withdrew a little farther away, and gave him chilling replies. He was quick to notice the change in her manner.

"What does this mean?" he began, half-angrily. "This is the first time we have met since yesterday, and am I to have nothing but cold looks after my compliance with your wishes?"

"You have my thanks," Viola answered, stiffly.

"I want some little reward as well. Come, we will make a compact. It shall be 'Miss Keith' in company, if it may be 'Viola' when we are alone. Circumstances have changed since we last met, and made the hopes I once indulged impossible; but ——"

Viola interrupted him haughtily. "Excuse me for reminding you, Captain Kane, that the unhappy circumstances you refer to had nothing to do with the frustration of your hopes. I believe it was long ago settled between us that they could never be realised. I must leave you now; Mrs. Carr will be expecting me."

Viola noticed the angry gleam in his eyes as he, too, rose and bowed in answer to her stately bend of the head.

"There! I have now provoked him to hate me!" she sighed to herself, as she walked away. "But what does it matter, after all? His hate is endurable, his love—is not!"

Viola was safely out of reach of experiencing the expression of either during the opening weeks of an unusually fine October.

Mrs. Carr caught a chill, which increased her usual ailments to such an extent that for a fortnight or more she was seriously ill, requiring constant and watchful nursing. For one of her temperament, she was a tolerably patient sufferer, and Viola, moved by sincere compassion, proved a most kind and trustworthy nurse. The invalid took a strange liking for the young girl, monopolising all her time and attention, and not enduring to lose sight of her even for an hour. But with the return of convalescence and the decline of physical pain came the re-appearance, in an aggravated form, of Mrs. Carr's former petulance and irritability. Viola had borne patiently the long and tedious confinement to close rooms, while the sun was shining, and birds were singing, and the reluctant swallows delaying their departure from a land where summer still lingered. But continued dropping will wear away a stone; and now that the stress was over her spirits began to droop, and her cheeks to pale, under the lesser trial of a worrying fault-finding that was almost incessant.

Now that her immediate anxiety was over, Lady Mary avoided the jarring atmosphere of the sick-room, where the most faithful service went unappreciated, and the most well-meaning attentions were ill-received. Walton, fretted by fruitless endeavours to please an unpleasable mistress, grumbled incessantly, and vented her ill-humour in impatience towards her fellow-victim, poor Viola, who was thus called upon to bear a double burden.

Even the usually unobservant Olive noticed her weary looks when she now and then encountered her aunt's companion in the corridor, which they both inhabited. These were their only meetings now, for during the last two or three weeks Viola had found it necessary to give up joining the family circle for the meals, which she now swallowed hastily in Mrs. Carr's ante-room.

Olive's own life at this time was a fully occupied and, consequently, pleasant one. Mr. Thorold, detained at St. Brenda's by his work for the Chapter, had undertaken to give her some hints in architectural drawing, a branch of art in which Olive was particularly interested. She was beginning a series of sketches in the Close, for the illustration of a work which her uncle intended to publish, and Mr. Thorold's lessons were, therefore, of infinite value. She would not allow to herself that there was also a pleasure in the renewal of their former habits of intimacy. The old childish days had passed away for ever, their respective positions had changed, and Thorold doubtless well understood that their present amicable league was a mere temporary business arrangement—an endeavour, on his part, to make some small return for her uncle's introductions and patronage.

Nevertheless, it was a fact that during his frequent visits to the Archdeacon, and the many hours that he and Olive passed together over their engrossing occupation, there had arisen a good understand-

ing and confidence between the two, which bordered strangely on their former friendship. Olive could talk to him as to no one else of aspirations, feelings, interests, lying far below the surface of her everyday life. She had unconsciously come to rely on his judgment, and to require his opinions to endorse her own. She scarcely knew how much in these long and confidential talks he was admitted once more into the inner sanctuary of her nature, and permitted to read its deeper secrets, hitherto guarded so jealously.

"I don't know when I have been so entirely happy!" she said to him, one day, as they were returning together from a seldom-visited nook in the Close, where Olive was sketching a ruined archway. "Perhaps it is because I am so busy and so much interested in my work."

"I have often thought that it is not the workers of the world who most deserve our pity," Thorold replied. "There is something wholesome and bracing about work, whatever its nature: we reap a benefit from fully occupied hours and diligently discharged duties, such as no mere pleasure-seeking existence can give. Work, like virtue, is its own reward; and whether the busy hand wields the spade or the darning-needle, the drones of the human hive may envy its owner."

"But, unfortunately, work is not always to be had for the asking, especially among my own sex. Indeed, how to enlarge the sphere of woman's work seems to me one of the great problems of the day. The time is past for their being, 'cabined, cribbed, confined,' Oriental fashion, and hampered at every step by the absurd conventionalities of society."

Thorold remained silent.

"You don't agree with me!" exclaimed Olive, a rare enthusiasm still lighting up her beautiful features.

"What does Lady Mary say?" he asked, replying to her question by another.

"Oh, mamma has no sympathy with the clamour for women's rights. She says, once descend into the arena of life, and we lose the 'crown of the causeway' and all our privileges for ever. But, then, mamma has always found plenty to do with her life."

"Exactly so. Women like Lady Mary are not likely to be at a loss. And, after all, it is by indirect influence that their work in the world is done. There is centrifugal as well as centripetal force. Work is generally given to those fitted and willing to undertake it; and it is those 'faithful over a few things' who are to be made 'rulers over many things,'" he finished, gravely. Then, seeing her bent head and thoughtful look, he added, smiling: "This sounds quite like a homily; but, indeed, I had no intention of preaching. Shall we go in?"

"Wait a moment." She was too much in earnest to notice his half

apology. "You say work comes to those willing to undertake it; but there is myself, for instance"—with the struggle which all reserved people feel in speaking of themselves—"except for my beloved drawing, just now, you cannot surely say that any work in particular is set before me?"

"There are many ways of helping our fellow-creatures, although the work may not be done with great noise and outcry. The little mouse was insignificant, you know, and went to work silently, yet in time it gnawed a lion free. In your case, I should say, rather——" he hesitated.

"What?" She waited imperiously for his answer.

"That, like many other people, you are apt to overlook the work near at hand in seeking for something grand and far off. Do you wish me to go on? There is your aunt, for instance. You were pitying Miss Keith, just now, for being kept in such close confinement all this fine weather. Could you not relieve guard now and then by taking her place?"

"You don't know my aunt. Her fidgety ways are intolerable."

"And poor Miss Keith has to put up with them day after day! Then it is pleasant work which women want—easy work; little to do, and plenty of credit to be gained by it. Anything but the work 'their hand findeth to do.' I see! Just as I thought!"

His harsh, almost scornful conclusion neutralised the effect of his words. Olive turned impatiently, and led the way to the house, towards which they walked in silence. It seemed as though she resented his plain speaking, though she herself had invited it.

Arrived at the threshold, Thorold gave up the impedimenta he had been carrying, and gravely went his way. It was almost like one of their childish quarrels long ago, which Olive used to take so much to heart. Thorold scarcely expected to find her in her usual corner of the Close that afternoon, yet was ruffled and annoyed, and thoroughly disappointed, as time wore on and still she did not come. He reviewed his words, and decided that she had cause for anger; but her indignation must have been great indeed to prevail over her eager wish to finish her sketch.

CHAPTER V.

SELF-SACRIFICE.

OLIVE, meantime, hastily despatched her luncheon, that she might return to complete her water-colour sketch of the old chapel before the sun left the ruins. As she was coming along the corridor from her room ready equipped with her sketching materials, she met Viola, taking her way, with weary step and pale face, back to Mrs. Carr's rooms, with a book which she had just been to select from the library.

Viola called up a faint smile and was about to pass by as usual; for,

as she well knew, Olive's time was exactly meted out, and she could not brook delay in her movements. But, contrary to custom, Olive herself stopped, conscience-pricked by the white face and heavy eyes.

"I am afraid you miss your walks, Miss Keith ; you are quite losing your colour."

"I have rather a headache this afternoon—nothing much ; it may pass off presently."

"Not in Aunt Charlotte's warm rooms. Supposing," she went on, with the echoes of the morning's conversation sounding in her ears, "supposing you were to go out and get some air and sunshine this lovely afternoon, while I take care of Mrs. Carr for you."

Viola's face brightened at the unexpected proposal, and she looked up gratefully. But suddenly her eye fell upon the sketch-book which Olive was carrying, and she remembered the sacrifice which her acceptance of the offer would entail.

"But no ; you want to finish your sketch. So fine as it is, too ! No, I could not. But thank you all the same for thinking of me ; it is very good of you. Mrs. Carr may, perhaps, be out soon : I shall do very well."

Her courageous struggle to hide her evident suffering, her wistful gratitude touched Olive. She put her hand on Viola's arm and detained her, as she was about to hurry away.

"My sketch can wait. Not a word more—I insist. Give me that book—put on your hat and go for a stroll, while it is bright and sunny." Olive's will when strongly exerted was as little to be resisted as her mother's.

"But Mrs. Carr !" hesitated Viola, half-yielding. "May I explain to her first ?"

"Certainly not. Leave that to me, and go at once. I promise to remain with her till you come back, and to amuse her—if I can !" grimly. "Don't hurry home ; I shall not expect you till tea-time ; so take a holiday for once."

Olive retraced her steps to her own room, laid by her hat and unfinished sketch with a sigh, and was off to her self-imposed task. Viola, with a bounding heart and some misgivings, hastened out into the sunshine, which had surely never shone so brightly as on this glorious October afternoon. Walking briskly, with a new spring of life pulsing through her veins, she found her way to the nearest meadows ; and there seating herself upon a rustic stile, overshadowed by a golden-brown beech-tree, feasted her eyes upon the long-desired sight of wild hedgerows, gay with a tangle of clematis and bryony, hips-and-haws ; of changing trees, of open pastures, and filmy threads of gossamer, spreading like a fairy fabric at her feet.

How gratefully the rural sounds from distant farm-yards fell upon the ears accustomed only to Mrs. Carr's harsh complainings ! How sweet came the piping of unseen birds from their shady coverts, and

the lowing of far-off cattle borne across the meadows! What a treat Olive's unexpected kindness had secured to her aunt's weary dependant!

Time flew fast in her rural solitude, but it was a refreshed and cheerful Viola who, an hour or two later, re-entered the Cathedral precincts, where the shadows were already growing long enough to bar out the sunshine. Under the great gateway she encountered Mr. Thorold, who looked up in surprise.

"Mrs. Carr is better, I see. Is she in the garden as usual?"

"No; she cannot leave the house yet."

"At all events, I am glad to see you out again. How did you persuade her to spare you?"

"It was Miss Egerton's doing. She made me take a holiday, and promised to fill my place meantime. I refused at first, for I knew how much she was interested in her sketching; but she would have her way, and here I am. Ah! if she only knew what a treat it has been! Only I have felt selfish in taking it."

"Not at all. I am sure Miss Egerton's pleasure this afternoon has equalled your own. I missed her from her usual place, but little guessed the reason of her non-appearance." And his expression grew so incomprehensibly bright and cheerful that Viola felt quite vexed with him. For she had been building up a little impossible romance of late to amuse her tedious hours.

Another acquaintance of the Egertons, who was becoming almost as frequent a visitor as Thorold himself, reached the Archdeacon's door just as Viola did; but, seeing her approach, turned to meet her. A vivid recollection of their former interview imparted an unconscious air of haughtiness to Viola's bearing, but Captain Kane's memory was apparently less good. He greeted her with an unembarrassed ease which relieved her at once, and nothing in his manner hinted that he bore her ill-will. Viola dared to relax into her usual self, and answered pleasantly enough his inquiries after Lady Mary and her daughters. Would he come in? Lady Mary was at home, and Miss Egerton. Her sister was spending the afternoon with a friend.

The slightest possible shadow seemed to flit across her companion's face.

No. He would come in some other day. His call was chiefly to inquire after—Mrs. Carr. Was she really convalescent?—And Miss Rose was out for the afternoon?

"Yes; she will only come back in time to dress for dinner."

"Ah! Perhaps when she returns you will be kind enough to give her this?" He produced a note from his pocket, which he handed to Viola, adding: "You will give it her yourself, will you not? I always mistrust servants' memories."

It was nearly tea-time when Viola entered Mrs. Carr's ante-room, with the old elastic tread that had been banished this week or more.

The familiar sound of the invalid's complaining tones penetrated even through the curtain, and she was not surprised to find Olive looking flushed and vexed.

"Oh, here you are at last!" was the invalid's greeting. "How long you have been, to be sure! Pray come and read to me. I am quite tired of the sound of Olive's voice. It is not nearly so pleasant as yours; and she will argue so over the book. She means well, I dare say, but it is tiresome of her. And the sun has been in my eyes all the afternoon. Olive could not get the blind right."

And so this was Olive's reward for the sacrifice of her afternoon! She jumped up and laid down the book, impatient to be gone while she could still restrain herself. Silently Viola followed her to the door and held back the curtain. Was she triumphing in praise won at her expense, Olive wondered, and stole a glance in passing.

But there was no triumph, only tears, shining in Viola's eyes, as, under cover of the curtain, she ventured to take Olive's hand with a grateful pressure between both her own, murmuring at the same time such a heartfelt "Thank you," that Olive's vexation all melted away in a keen sensation of pleasure. Perhaps, in atonement for her momentary suspicion, she yielded to a sudden impulse, and, bending down, kissed the gentle face upturned to hers.

On the whole, that was a happy afternoon for both the girls.

An hour later, Viola, going to her room at the summons of the dressing-bell, met Rose in the corridor, still in her walking-things, and seized the opportunity of discharging her commission.

"Here is a note which Captain Kane asked me to give you," she said, handing the letter, which was received with such a sudden blush that Viola thought it necessary to explain. "It is from *Captain Kane*, not his uncle."

"Yes; I understand."

At this moment, Olive appeared at the end of the passage, and in some confusion, Rose thrust the note into her pocket, and retreated to her own room.

Tête-à-tête with her mother, that evening, Olive could not help giving vent to some of her indignation against Mrs. Carr, for her want of consideration towards her companion. "To be sure," she owned frankly, at the end of her philippic, "Aunt Charlotte cannot help being ill!"

"But she can help being tyrannical," returned Lady Mary, with indignant emphasis. "What do you think happened last night? I was up later than usual, finishing some letters, so that it was long past midnight when I heard footsteps in the corridor, and that sort of stealthy movement which one notices in the general silence. I threw on a shawl, and hurried to your aunt's room, fearing that she was worse. There I found Miss Keith, in dressing-gown and slippers, pale as a ghost with the fright of her sudden arousal, actually book in hand, about to read Mrs. Carr to sleep! Her lovely chestnut hair

was all streaming over her shoulders, and certainly, as your aunt said, made a most becoming frame to a most beautiful picture ; but I have no patience with her ridiculously inopportune personal remarks, which make poor Miss Keith most uncomfortable. I turned to Mrs. Carr for an explanation, for she was wide awake, and seemed much as usual. It appeared that she had sent her maid to summon Miss Keith, as neither of them could remember whether the mixture the doctor had ordered was to be taken every two, or every four hours ! 'Is that all ?' I cried indignantly. 'And pray what is Miss Keith doing with that book ?' 'Well, Mary, I am very restless, and as she is here, I thought she might as well read me to sleep before she went,' your aunt answered, coolly. I lost all patience, and said, plainly, she should do nothing of the kind ; and that if she required a companion by night as well as by day, we must take means to find her a second, for that the same person could not undertake everything. Then I saw Miss Keith back to her room, made some vicarious apologies for my sister-in-law, and absolved her in future from all unnecessary night-work."

"Poor thing !" cried Olive, with feeling. "No wonder she looks so pale and worn. She should not allow herself to be tyrannised over in such a fashion. I should not submit to such bullying."

"Nor does she always ; for, gentle as she looks, that slight girl can pluck up a spirit sometimes. Walton told me a story about her the other evening. Mrs. Carr was in one of her fidgety moods, and had been most trying all day ; impatient, worrying, and finding fault to such an extent that at last she actually succeeded in making the poor girl cry ; no easy task, as Walton assures me, for as a rule she is a model of forbearance and self-control. Perhaps the sight of her tears made your aunt feel slightly ashamed of herself ; for later on, when Miss Keith came in dressed for dinner to see if she wanted anything, Mrs. Carr made Walton bring her jewel-case, and, unlocking it, took out a handsome gold chain of Indian work, which she gave to Miss Keith, telling her to keep it as a token of her approval : 'for, on the whole,' she said, 'you please me very well.' Without a moment's hesitation, she gathered the gold links up in her hand ('Such a beautiful chain as it was, too, my lady,' said Walton), and handed it back to your aunt. 'No,' she said, firmly. 'If I have satisfied you, Mrs. Carr, show it by a little consideration. Have patience with me. Give me a kind word now and then. I don't want presents.' And, with a proud air of dignity, which seems to have impressed Walton immensely, she turned and swept out of the room."

"Well done, Miss Keith !" cried Olive, heartily. "I hope Aunt Charlotte felt really small, for once !"

"Miss Keith has both tact and strength of character. Certainly no one has ever managed your aunt so well before," owned her mother. "But her motive in clinging so persistently to so disagreeable a task remains a mystery to me."

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNPLEASANT INTERVIEW.

"MISS KEITH, is that you? Are you going out?"

The voice came from Rose Egerton's room, and Viola paused at the door in passing.

"Only as far as the draper's, to give a message from Mrs. Carr."

"Then, perhaps, you won't mind doing something for me. I do so want the last volume of *"Love and Life."* Will you change it for me at Smith's bookstall? I have this horrid cold, and mamma and Olive will not be home till night, and it is so frightfully dull shut up here all alone."

Viola glanced out of the window; the station was not exactly the place she would have chosen to frequent at this time of day, for the short winter afternoon was already at an end, and the dusk was gathering.

Rose noticed her hesitation. "Yes; I know mamma does not allow us to go there so late, but we are well known here; it is different for you, a stranger. I would send if I could, but Thomas is out with the carriage, and Susan has a face-ache, and the rest are too busy."

Viola's good nature would not allow her to make further objection. She took up the volume, saying cheerfully: "Well, I will go at once, before it gets darker."

"Stay, Miss Keith," cried Rose, as if in afterthought; "Captain Kane talked of going to town by the express this afternoon. If you should see him at the station, will you give him this note? I particularly want it to reach him before he starts."

There was a nervous excitement very foreign to her usual composure in Rose's manner, which struck Viola as strange. She was feverish, perhaps, from her cold, which might also account for her flushed cheeks. This second commission did not make the first more palatable; but she had no real ground for refusing so simple a request, and reluctantly took the letter.

"Thanks; I am so much obliged. It is really quite light out of doors, I think, but the Close is so gloomy."

The dusk and gloom of the Close seemed to have communicated themselves to the rest of St. Brenda's. The shop people were already lighting their lamps; and when Viola, having hastily given her message at the draper's, began briskly to climb the long slope to the station, which lay just out of the town, it was too dark to distinguish one passer-by from another. But the station gained, all was life and bustle. The express was nearly due and the passengers for town were assembling; hurrying towards the ticket-office, looking after luggage, providing themselves with newspapers.

Viola edged her way through the busy knots of people to the bookstall, and after waiting some minutes, at last succeeded in

getting attention. Then she looked round for Captain Kane. The station was fully lighted, but she walked from end to end of the platform without seeing anything of him. A sensation of relief came over her, and she was just debating if she might consider herself free to go, when he came hurrying in, looked round hastily, and espying her, went at once to meet her.

"This is quite too good of you, Miss Keith! You have — Ah, thanks," as she silently handed him the note. "My friends in the Close are all well, I hope? And Miss Rose—is her cold better?"

"No, worse; she has been obliged to put off her visit to town for a few days. Lady Mary will not hear of her travelling while her throat is still so troublesome."

"Ah! quite right; she must take care of herself." But, as Viola perceived, an unmistakable shadow crossed his face. "I am off to town myself by this train, and dine with my uncle at his club to-night. Miss Rose may like to know that he talks of returning to-morrow, a day earlier than he intended."

"I will tell her," said Viola.

"And will you please give her this little packet at the same time? I was just wondering where to find a trustworthy messenger."

He spoke with a would-be carelessness, but with a furtive glance at his companion, which went unperceived. A close observer might also have noticed the look of relief which passed over his countenance as she accepted his commission, bade him good-bye, and turned to go. But he detained her.

"One moment, Miss Keith. Come this way out of the crowd," leading her to a more retired part of the platform. "Will you please arrange that Miss Rose is alone when you give her that note? I know ladies have ways of managing such things."

"Some ladies, perhaps, but I am not one of them, Captain Kane," said Viola, her sleeping suspicions at once roused again. "If such secresy is necessary, you must take your packet back. I will have nothing to do with any underhand proceedings."

He grew pale with suppressed rage, and a sneer disfigured his handsome features as he said, quietly and cuttingly: "I should have thought Miss — Keith the very best person to apply to, under the circumstances; but your virtuous indignation does you credit. Of course, it is only assumed—you cannot be in earnest in refusing to oblige me?"

"And why not?" Viola asked, haughtily. She could almost hear her heart beat, but tried to preserve at least an outward calm. He bent lower, and looked with a malicious smile into her face, where the colour was beginning to rise.

"Do you forget that you are in my power? One word of mine will entirely change your position here. Shall I speak that word?"

"As you please," she answered, proudly. "It will not be necessary, as I shall anticipate you by myself telling Lady Mary the whole

story. I have some spirit left, and I will neither be bribed nor intimidated. Here is your packet."

"Brava! Spoken like a heroine. But a truce to these heroics, which are quite uncalled for. Give me my letter. I can find another messenger, no doubt; and, after all, it is quite unimportant."

He gave an embarrassed laugh, which tried hard to sound natural, and, with the letter, took her hand for a moment. "Come, Viola, I was only in jest. Let us be friends again, and forget our little differences."

"Friends we shall never be, Captain Kane; but we may manage to keep the peace if you will remember in future that I am not accustomed to be addressed by my Christian name in such familiar fashion. Let me go, please."

She resolutely withdrew her hand from his clasp, and drawing herself up, turned away, and quickly threaded the crowd, never slackening speed till she found herself once more retracing her steps towards the town, and cooling her flushed cheeks in the refreshing night air. In her preoccupation she did not notice three ladies, who turned to look after her in wonder as she left the station.

"There, mamma! I told you so! I thought she was not as quiet as she looks!" exclaimed the eldest Miss Warburton, as Viola disappeared.

"I detest the 'still-deep fast;' don't you, Tilly?" said her sister, cuttingly. "I'm sorry for Captain Kane, too. He's not a bad sort."

The railway bell rang suddenly, close in their ears. There was a prolonged whistle, and the express dashed into the station. Captain Kane flung himself into a first-class carriage.

"She shall pay for this!" he muttered, savagely. "Let her run the length of her tether first, though, before she is pulled up. The girl has a confounded deal of spirit—and how distractingly pretty she looked!"

Mrs. Warburton, as we have seen, made it her proud boast that she came of Raleigh blood, and could claim cousinship with Lady Mary herself. True, the branch whence she sprang had been early lopped off the family tree; but it was none the less true that her paternal great-grand-uncle had once figured among the collaterals clustering beneath the Castlemaine coronet in "*Lodge's Peerage*." Even this faint aroma of nobility hanging about her, stood her in good stead outside the Close gates; but the remote Raleigh connection had not served as a passport to intimacy with Lady Mary, as she once had hoped. Lady Mary was indeed exclusive to a degree. A very small proportion of her numerous acquaintance were admitted to her friendship. And the few among them who were allowed to pass beyond the limit of formal visiting in the large drawing-room to a friendly talk over a cup of tea in Lady Mary's own especial sanctum, valued the right much as the haute noblesse of the French Court esteemed the privilege of the tabouret. Needless to say,

Mrs. Warburton was not one of these chosen few. Her orbit was, indeed, an extreme outer circle, far removed from the great central sun whose favouring beams she coveted. Lady Mary was grandly courteous when they met, and once a year included Mrs. Warburton's rather fast daughters in her largest garden party: and there the acquaintance reached its limit.

There was certainly nothing about the girls to attract Lady Mary's fastidious eye. Nature had endowed Bella and Tilly Warburton with the sallow complexion appertaining to brunettes; but as each in her turn approached maturity, art supplied them with a surface veneer, supposed to represent the pink-and-white bloom of a blonde. Art also pencilled their eyebrows, and laid a deep shade beneath their eyelids suggestive of melancholy thought, which process also enhanced the brilliancy of their somewhat lack-lustre eyes. But art seemed to have reserved her embellishments for the surface, and certainly had not attempted either to develop or adorn Nature in the inner woman of the Warburton girls; so that the great qualities of head and heart, doubtless descended from the noble Raleigh stem, at present lay dormant and unsuspected within them.

Perhaps the consciousness that they themselves lived in a glass-house, very assailable by malicious pebbles, made the enjoyment of indulging their secret grudge against Lady Mary, by throwing a stone at one of her household, all the more keen to the Warburtons. It is certain none of the three stayed their hand; and the little scene which the mother and daughters had witnessed at the station, embellished, exaggerated, and misinterpreted, formed the topic of talk at many tea-tables during the next few days.

A fire was blazing in Rose Egerton's room, trying to vie in brightness with the flames of two tall candles on the mantelpiece, which shed a becoming light upon the pretty face of its owner, as she moved restlessly about it, unable to settle to anything. Even the volume of "Love and Life," so much desired a few hours since, lay face downward upon the table, still unfinished.

The decorations of Rose's sanctum were after the approved fashion of the day, and the quaint old room offered a fine field for the display of a liberal and impartial taste, only limited in its indulgence by the extent of her pocket-money. Brackets of sundry materials projected in divers shapes and sizes from every corner of the room, and from the side walls also, wherever a break in the range of panelled cupboards, which were the glory of the corner house, permitted; plates and plaques of china, subjects various, filled up the interstices. Upon the brackets, a perfect menagerie of diminutive animals, in the same perishable material, disported themselves amid vases, cups and receptacles of every period.

In the midst of this chaos of ornament, with no method in the madness of its disposition, Rose wandered, uncheered and disconsolate,

until, as nine strokes sounded from a little travelling clock, watched over on its bracket by a small representation in bronze of the Great Napoleon, came a tap at the door, followed by the entrance of Mrs. Carr's companion.

Rose brightened up. "This is kind of you, Miss Keith! I was just wishing for someone to come and enliven my solitude. Thank you so much for the book, which Susan brought me. Won't you sit down?"

Rose pushed a tempting little low chair closer to the fire, and as she did so, asked carelessly: "Did you see anything of Captain Kane at the station?"

"Yes; I gave him the note." Viola remained standing, ignoring Rose's invitation.

"And there was no answer?"

"There was a packet, but ——" Viola made an effort, and spoke out bravely. "I refused to bring it, because—Miss Egerton! Please don't think me disobliging; but I hope you will never ask me again to do what I did this afternoon. That was what I came to say. Good-night."

Rose's fair face became suffused with colour, but curiously enough, she attempted no remonstrance. Only as Viola reached the door she recovered herself.

"I am sorry to have troubled you; it shall not occur again," she said, quietly. "May I ask you to say nothing about the matter, either to my mother—or, anyone else? She might be displeased."

"You may depend upon me," answered Viola, rather proudly. "I shall not give it another thought. Good-night."

(To be continued.)

SONNET.

THERE is a moaning in the midnight sky
 Of winds that have no resting and no pleasure,
 Like witches wailing o'er a vanished treasure
 Hoarded in hope their forfeit souls to buy.
 Nought else disturbs, except the night-bird's cry,
 The silence of my sad and lonely leisure,
 And in a life that moments cannot measure
 I live again the days that are gone by.
 Gone by? The dark mysterious past appals me!
 Where are they gone, those days that are no more?
 My heart's a sepulchre that only keeps
 Their skeleton—the memory that enthalls me.
 Surely their spirit somewhere doth endure,
 And only till the Resurrection sleeps.

A. M. H.

A PAINTER'S VENGEANCE.

BY MARY E. PENN.

THIRTY years ago the Belgian painter, Antoine Wiertz, was astonishing the artistic world by the powerful but extravagant productions which are now exhibited at Brussels in the Museum which bears his name.

Though his brush was generally occupied with classical subjects, or weird allegorical designs such as the "Contest between Good and Evil," he occasionally consented to paint portraits. This was a favour, however, which he only accorded to those whose physiognomy happened to interest him. It may be added that his taste inclined rather to the grotesque and eccentric than the beautiful.

One day he received a visit from a certain M. van Spach, a notary, who had been seized with the desire to have his features perpetuated by the celebrated artist. Maître van Spach—a dry, wrinkled, keen-eyed old gentleman, with an expression of mingled shrewdness and self-importance—was one of the wealthiest men in Brussels, and as avaricious as he was rich; a characteristic which had procured him the nickname of "Maître Harpagon."

Wiertz was aware of his visitor's failing; nevertheless he acceded to his request without demur. The fact was, he had been conquered at first sight by the old scrivener's picturesque head. That head was a perfect treasure to an artist, with its bald cranium, wrinkled forehead, shaggy brows overhanging the small piercing eyes, hooked nose, and thin-lipped mouth, which shut like a trap. Wiertz was fascinated, and while his visitor was pompously explaining his wishes, the artist was taking mental note of every line and feature.

"How much will the portrait cost?" was the notary's cautious inquiry.

"My terms are ten thousand francs, Monsieur," was the reply.

The lawyer started, stared incredulously, shrugged his shoulders, and took up his hat. "In that case," he answered drily, "I have only to wish you good morning."

Alarmed at the prospect of losing this promising "subject," whom he had already in imagination transferred to canvas, Wiertz hastened to add: "Those are my usual terms; but as your face interests me, I am willing to make a reduction in your favour. Suppose we say five thousand?"

But M. van Spach still objected, urging that such a sum was exorbitant for "a strip of painted canvas."

At length, after much bargaining and hesitation, he agreed to pay three thousand francs for the portrait—"frame included;" and this being settled, he rose to take leave.

"When am I to give you the first sitting?" he inquired.

"There is no hurry," replied the artist, who had his own intentions regarding this portrait. "I am somewhat occupied just now, but will let you know when I have a morning at liberty. *Au revoir!*"

The moment his visitor had left the studio Wiertz seized palette and brushes, placed a fresh canvas on his easel, and dashed in the outlines of the portrait from memory. He painted as if for a wager, while the summer daylight lasted; and, thanks to his marvellous rapidity of execution, when evening came the picture was all but finished.

He had represented the old Notary seated at a table, strewn with papers and parchments, his full face turned towards the spectator. The head was brought out in masterly relief against a shadowed background, and painted in the artist's best style; bold, free and unconventional, showing no signs of its hurried execution. The likeness was striking in its fidelity, giving not only the features, but the character and expression of the original, so that the canvas seemed instinct with life.

The following morning Wiertz gave the finishing touches to his work, put it in a frame, and despatched it to Van Spach; instructing the messenger to wait for an answer.

He rubbed his hands with pleasure as he pictured the old gentleman's delight and astonishment, and anticipated the sensation which this *tour de force* would create in artistic circles.

In due time the messenger returned—with the picture in one hand, and a note in the other. Wiertz hastily dismissed him, opened the letter, and read as follows:

"SIR,—I beg to return your extraordinary production, which I cannot suppose is intended for my portrait, as it bears no sort of resemblance to me.

In art, as in everything else, I like to have my money's worth for my money, and I do not choose to pay you the sum of three thousand francs for one afternoon's work. As you do not consider me worth the trouble of painting seriously, I must decline any further transactions with you, and remain, Sir,

"Yours obediently,

"PETER VAN SPACH."

When the artist recovered from his astonishment at this remarkable epistle, he burst into a fit of laughter which made the studio ring.

"His money's worth—ha, ha! *Maitre Harpagon* has over-reached himself for once. He could have sold it for five times what it cost him—the benighted old Philistine!"

He placed the rejected picture once more on the easel, and regarded it long and critically, only to become more convinced of its merit. He knew that art-judges would pronounce it a *chef-d'œuvre*. His amusement began to give place to irritation at the indignity to

which his work had been subjected, and vague projects of vengeance rose before him as he paced the floor, with bent head and knitted brows.

Suddenly he stopped short, his eyes sparkling with mischievous satisfaction at an idea which had suddenly occurred to him. He took up his palette, and set to work upon the picture again, adroitly altering and retouching.

In an incredibly short space of time it underwent a startling metamorphosis. While carefully preserving the likeness, he had altered the face by exaggerating its characteristics; giving a cunning leer to the deeply-set eyes, a grimmer curve to the thin lips, and a scowl to the heavy brows. A stubbly beard appeared on the chin, and the attitude became drooping and decrepit.

Then the notary's accessories vanished, the background becoming the wall of a cell, with a barred window; while the table, with its litter of papers and parchments, was transformed into a rough bench, beneath which might be discerned a pitcher and a loaf.

When this was achieved to his satisfaction, the artist signed his work, and gummed on the frame a conspicuous label, with the inscription:—"Imprisoned for Debt."

Then he sent for a fiacre, and drove to Melchior's, the well-known picture-dealer in the Rue de la Madeleine, whose window offers such constant attraction to lovers of art.

"I have something to show you," began Wiertz. "I have just finished this study, which I think is fairly successful. Can you find room for it in your window?"

"Find room for it? I should think so!" exclaimed the dealer, enthusiastically. "My dear fellow, it is first-rate! I have seen nothing of yours more striking and original—and that is saying much. What price do you put upon it?"

"I have not yet decided," replied the painter. "Give it a good place in the window, and if a purchaser presents himself let me know."

The picture was immediately installed in the place of honour, and soon attracted a curious group. All day Melchior's window was surrounded; and next morning the papers noticed the wonderful picture, and sent fresh crowds to gaze at it.

Among the rest was a friend of Maître van Spach, who could hardly believe his eyes on recognising the worthy notary in this "questionable shape." He hastened at once to inform him of the liberty which had been taken with his person; and not long afterwards the old lawyer burst into the shop, startling its proprietor, who at once recognized the original of the famous picture.

"M. Melchior," began the intruder, "I have been made the victim of a shameful practical joke by one of your clients. It is my portrait, sir, that hangs in your window; it is I, sir—I, Maître van Spach—who am held up to ridicule in that infamous daub—pilloried for all the

world to see as an imprisoned bankrupt! If the thing is not at once removed, I shall apply to the police."

At this threat the picture-dealer merely smiled. "I must refer you to the artist, Monsieur," he returned, coolly. "The picture belongs to him, and I cannot remove it without his permission."

To Wiertz's house went Maître van Spach, in a white heat of rage and indignation. On entering the studio, he found the painter lounging in an arm-chair, smoking his afternoon cigar.

"Ah, it is you, Maître?" was his bland greeting. "To what fortunate circumstance am I indebted for this visit? Pray take a seat. Do you smoke? You will find those cigars excellent."

"Monsieur," interrupted the notary, cutting short these courtesies with scant ceremony: "let us come to the point. There is at this moment in Melchior's window a picture—a caricature—which makes me the laughing stock of the town. I insist on its being taken out at once—at once, do you understand?"

"Not quite," replied the other imperturbably. "It is true there is a picture of mine at Melchior's, but I really don't see how it makes *you* ridiculous."

"You don't see?—But that picture is my portrait, sir—my portrait!" cried his visitor, rapping his cane upon the floor.

"Your portrait?" echoed the other, with a look of surprise.

"Of course it is, as anyone can see at a glance. You ——"

"But—excuse me," the painter interrupted, "you said yesterday that it did not resemble you in the least. See—here is your letter to that effect."

Van Spach coloured and bit his lip. He felt that he was caught.

"Such being the case," continued Wiertz, "and the work being returned on my hands, I have a perfect right to dispose of it to the best advantage."

The notary took a turn across the room, to recover his composure.

"Come," he said, at length, forcing a smile, "let us try to arrange this ridiculous affair amicably. I will give you the three thousand francs at once, and take the horrible thing out of the window ——"

"Stay a moment," interrupted his companion, as he flicked the ashes from his cigar, and carelessly changed his position. "You must be aware that the picture in its present shape is ten times more valuable than a mere portrait. It is now a work of imagination and invention, and I may own that I consider it one of my most successful canvases. I could not think of parting with it for less than fifteen thousand francs."

The notary gasped. "Fifteen thousand francs! You are joking!"

"Not at all. That is my price; you may take it or leave it."

There was a moment's pause; then the visitor turned on his heel.

"I leave it, then! Go to the deuce with your picture!" he retorted, as he left the room, banging the door behind him.

He had not gone many yards from the house, however, when he

stopped short and reflected. So long as that ill-omened canvas remained on view in Melchior's window he would not know a moment's peace. The story would be sure to get wind, and even his friends would join in the laugh against him. He would hardly dare to show his face abroad. At any sacrifice, this scandal must be stopped. But—fifteen thousand francs! He fairly groaned as he reluctantly retraced his steps towards the house.

"Monsieur Wiertz," he began, in a conciliatory tone, "I have reconsidered the matter, and—and I agree to your terms. I will take your picture for the sum you named."

Wiertz threw away his cigar, and rose.

"Monsieur, you are very kind. But it happens that I, too, have been considering, and a brilliant idea has occurred to me."

The notary shuddered. He dreaded Wiertz's "ideas," and he had a presentiment that some fresh disaster was in store for him.

"What is it?" he asked, nervously.

"As my picture seems to have made a sensation, I think I shall advertise it to be raffled for at five francs a ticket, and, that all the town may have a chance of seeing it, I shall hire a commissionaire to carry it through the streets for a day or two. Not a bad notion, —eh?"

Maitre van Spach was speechless with consternation. "You—you would not do that?" he stammered.

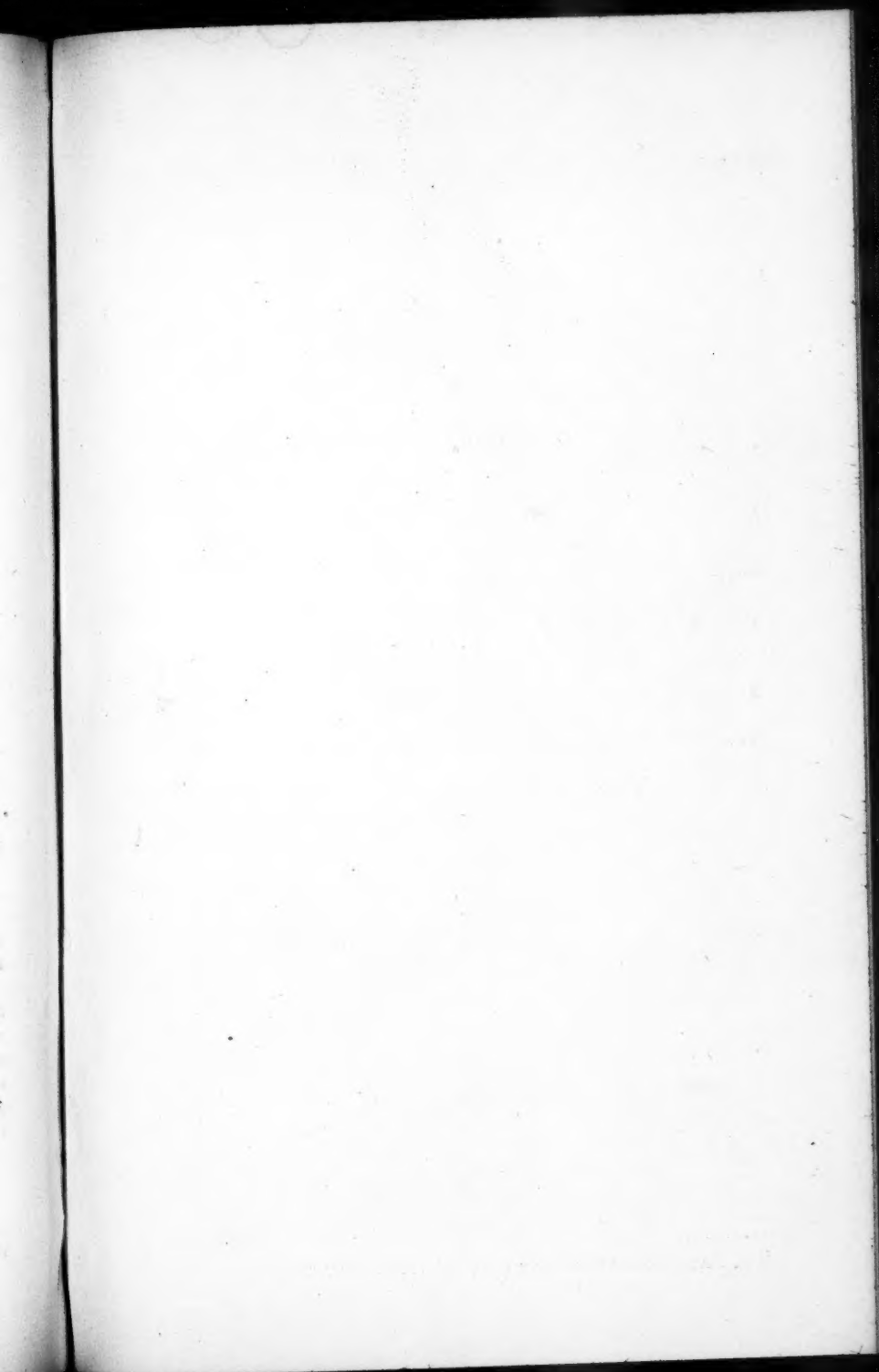
"Why not? I am confident the plan would succeed—so confident that I wouldn't give it up for less than thirty thousand francs—money down."

The unfortunate notary burst into a cold perspiration, and wiped his forehead with his handkerchief. To see himself trotted round Brussels on a porter's back, labelled "Imprisoned for Debt!" It was like a horrible nightmare.

"Here," he exclaimed, desperately, taking out his pocket-book—"here is a cheque for the amount. For heaven's sake, let me have the picture, and I will say no more about it."

Half an hour afterwards the detestable canvas was in his possession; but it was not until he had cut it out of the frame and burnt it to ashes that he felt himself safe from some fresh manifestation of the painter's vengeance.

Meantime, Wiertz cashed the cheque, and after deducting the sum of ten thousand francs—the price he had first demanded—forwarded the rest to the charitable fund of the town in the name of Maitre van Spach.





R. AND E. TAYLOR.

M. ELLEN STAPLES.

"MRS. HATHERLEY ABSOLUTELY HAD THE EFFRONTERY TO HINT THAT IT MIGHT BE DICK," WOUND UP GEORGIE.